

Yaoi/Fiction/Erotica
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All Lord Mink's attempts to tame his pet, the notorious Riki the Dark, have failed. The rebellious mongrel has run away. Where will he go? And will Iason find him? Find out what happens next in the final book of Kira Takenouchi's Volume I trilogy, *Taming Riki*.



16+
ABSOLUTELY NOT
FOR
CHILDREN



VOL. I
PART 3

TAMING RIKI

KIRA TAKENOUCHI



TAMING RIKI

VOLUME I - PART 3



きら たけのうち

KIRA TAKENOUCHI

Taming Riki

Taming Riki

By Kira Takenouchi

Volume One

Part III

Yaoi House Publishing

Wetheridge, England & Naples, Florida, USA

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For Rieko Yoshihara,
For Her Vision

For David,
Who Helped Me Out of the Abyss

For Camry,
Who Believed in Me

And Finally,
For Dena, and for Her Sister Ann,
May You Both Find Peace Now

Acknowledgements

The fact that you are holding this book now is a bloody miracle. So much has happened since *Taming Riki* Volume I, Part 2, that there were definitely times when we *all* thought this book would never come to pass.

And yet it did. I won't get into the obstacles and challenges I faced while finishing Part 3, as it would probably take a whole book just to tell that story. And some stories, my friend, are best left untold.

There is one thing I learned during my journey over the past few years, a lesson that was long in coming. What I learned was this: sometimes you just have to listen to the music of your own heart, even when the whole world is singing some other song. For a long time, I found myself unable to commit to anything; I was easily persuaded by others, and it seemed like everyone around me had a strong opinion about what I should be doing with my life and my writing—everyone but me. I had no resolve and allowed myself to be pressured first one way and then another, ultimately losing everything, including my sanity, and more than once.

That cycle might have continued indefinitely had I not resolved the issues that were at the root of the problem. That required courage on my part: basically I had to stop listening to what everyone was telling me, on both sides of the argument. Not to do so would have been pure folly, for I was driving myself mad trying to decide what to do. In the past two years alone, I've enjoyed no less than three severe manic episodes as a result of my inner turmoil. Despite medication, I simply could not hold onto my sanity when confronted with these deeply personal, and oftentimes spiritual, dilemmas. No, my thoughts were so tangled because of the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing that madness was inevitable.

I knew it had to stop. The day that changed everything for me was the day I sat with my friend Lonnie, holding her hand as she passed away. I'd never witnessed someone's death before, face to face, and it shook me up. I realized then how unpredictable life is, and how very short—none of us knows how long we have on

this planet. On my deathbed I don't want to have to wonder about whose life I really lived. I'm not here to live the life anyone else might have planned for me. No, I have to live my own life. Shakespeare nailed it: *To thine own self be true*.

The night of Lonnie's memorial, my daughter tried to commit suicide. Once again, I was at a crossroads. I was desperate to be closer to her and at first, in order to do that, I returned to my writing, hoping simply for some income from it. I was able to spend a few months with her, though ultimately I was forced to return to my parents' home, as I'm still, unfortunately, climbing out of poverty. But I realized as soon as I started writing again, that this is what I was meant to do. This is my gift—and perhaps the only thing I really can do given my struggle with severe bipolar disorder, which has prevented me from holding down more traditional types of employment since my first hospitalization seven years ago. It is perhaps the only way I can give my daughter any sort of financial support, support that I know she needs to help her deal with her own demons.

Once again, I was faced with my personal dilemma about whether or not writing yaoi was immoral. One of my church friends, upon somehow discovering that I had returned to my writing, left a message on my phone begging me to “repent” of this great sin, declaring that what I was doing was *unholy*. So what I did was pray, and listen to what I thought God was *truly* speaking to my heart. In that quiet listening I believe I finally came to the truth, that my writing has nothing to do with my salvation. Salvation is given through grace, not works. *Further, I do not believe that God condemns anyone because of who they love*. The screaming about the immorality of homosexuality comes from the Church, not from God.

I saw very clearly that what was “sinful” in my life was not what I wrote, but how I treated people. To do the right thing meant, first and foremost, providing some restitution for past wrongs. So I have attempted to do this, in part, by finishing this book, and by ensuring that anyone who was truly injured in some material way by my past decisions, would be somehow compensated, even if it meant I could never climb out of the financial hole I'm currently in. I am still in the process of providing that restitution but my hope is that many of you reading this book are now at peace with me and have, perhaps, a better understanding of my past decisions, even if you will never understand completely what happened over the past few years.

In the end, my friend, I had to listen to my own heart and have the guts to follow that direction. Whether it is now too late for me to regain my footing and be successful at my chosen profession remains to be seen, but this book is the first step. It is also a final step, in that it brings closure to this trilogy. It was important to me to finish this book, no matter what it cost me, so that I could make good the promise I made to all of you years ago, when I first planned the trilogy.

If you are wondering about the rest of my books, yes, they are all now slated to be published by Yaoi House Publishing over the next few years. The next book you will see offered is the *Headmaster's Chambers* manga, Issue 1, which should be available at the YHP website in November 2010. After that we are anticipating the *In the Headmaster's Chambers* novel to hit the press, followed by *The Boy from Braxton Creek*, both of which are scheduled to be published in 2011. All my series are currently under development at KiraFix.com, in case you are interested. When the remaining books will be published simply depends on when they are finished, but if you visit the Yaoi House Publishing website you will see which books we believe will be finished first—those are the ones you'll see displayed. We haven't shown any of the *Taming Riki* Volume II books yet, as we are still trying to decide whether or not to proceed with them. If we do, they will most likely be released as chapter books rather than a trilogy, as we feel this will be *much* easier in terms of editing, allowing for a quicker release of the series.

As for this book, you will notice quite a number of differences as compared to the version available online. I've had a lot of time to think about the trilogy as a whole and make changes that I believe enhance the flow of the story and make more sense, in terms of character development. One reason this book took so long to release is that I was not at all happy with it, but after much thoughtful labor, I am now fairly pleased with how it's finally come together. I have cut out a number of punishment scenes, which some of you may find surprising, but I believe these edits make sense when you consider the story from beginning to end in terms of Riki's "taming." Because the length of this book had gotten out of control, I also had to cut out a few subplots and pairings, such as much of the Odi/Tai material. Some of this may be available as smaller chapter books later or else moved to Volume II.

I would love to receive some feedback about this book, so please don't hesitate to contact me with your views.

Now, when it comes to who to acknowledge for this book, I'm a bit at a loss, because given the long span of time from when I initially started this book until now, it was almost as if a hurricane went through my mind, destroying everything in its path. There are therefore probably individuals who helped with the initial version of this book in terms of proofreading, for instance, who I cannot now acknowledge as I no longer even know who was involved. I opted not to have anyone proofread this version as I wanted the book to be a complete surprise, and I didn't want it to circulate the Net, as the other manuscripts did. I'm not sure who among my former proofreaders was to blame for that, but I don't really care and am not interested in pointing fingers or getting revenge or anything like that, I simply wanted to be sure that *this* book did not share a similar fate.

One person who did help me enormously with this version is David, one of the editors at Yaoi House Publishing. I must thank him for all his editing suggestions (even if, being a stubborn arse, I didn't use most of them) but especially for kicking me in the ass on a regular basis so that this book would make the deadline. He was formally against my making any changes to the manuscript available online out of fear that I wouldn't make the deadline, but I felt tremendous edits as well as rewriting needed to happen and so in the end I did what I thought had to be done. I do, however, truly appreciate his daily encouragement and scoldings, both of which helped keep me on track so that I could finish the book by the Halloween launch.

Special thanks to Rhonda and Camry for their help with Yaoi House Publishing, and for being so supportive generally. I want to thank, too, my Facebook friends, who have really helped me keep going in recent months. Thank you to those who have sent me notes of encouragement. I want to thank, too, my former friends Esther and Jaxxy, who really did try to help me, I believe, during my dramatic journey in recent years. Our falling out has been a disappointment to me, and though I can understand their positions regarding me, I will always wish that things might have been resolved differently; for my part, I harbor no animosity or unforgiveness and wish them both the best on their respective journeys. Thank you for standing with me, when you did.

But most of all, I want to thank *you*, my reader, for giving me another chance. Without your belief in me, Part 3 would never have been completed. So now, without further ado, enjoy the final book of the *Taming Riki* Volume I trilogy.

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Runaway Pet

RIKI WALKED FASTER, FEELING extraordinarily anxious. Then he stopped, hesitating. Perhaps he should go back. There was still time; Katze wouldn't miss him yet. Was he really going to walk away from Iason, just like that?

He knew, deep in his gut, that his chances of successfully eluding his Master were very slim. After all, where could he go? The Blondie's reach extended everywhere. The mongrel couldn't help but shiver when he imagined how Iason would punish him, should he be captured after attempting to run away.

"Out of the way, pet," a silver-haired Elite ordered sharply. Riki moved aside to let him pass, wondering how the Elite knew he was a pet. Then he remembered that he still wore his collar, engraved with Iason's initials. With shaking fingers, he zipped up his jacket to cover it, and then continued walking.

One thing he knew for sure: if he was to have any chance at all, he needed to act fast. He needed to get out of Tanagura. But...he couldn't very well hide in Midas, either; Iason had contacts there, including the Midas Police. And he couldn't return to Ceres—not after what he had done to Bison. He could make for Urus, but he knew that once the Blondie issued an alert for him, everyone there would be on the lookout for him, as well. Besides, he had never even been to Urus.

There wasn't time to leave Amoi; by the time he secured a seat, an alert would be out for him, for sure. Anyway, where would he go? The only language he knew was Amoian.

Suddenly Riki had a thought: a very interesting thought, indeed. What about Dana Burn, the old ruins from the Revolution? No one would think to look for him there!

A shudder passed through him as he recalled the many rumors he had heard about the old site. It was said that it was haunted by the dead who were burned there during the Revolution. But surely such stories had no truth to them.

When he was the leader of Bison, the gang had occasionally talked about going there, sometimes daring one another to spend the night in the ancient structure alone, but there was always some excuse that prevented their ever stepping foot on the old grounds. In truth, Riki, like the others, had always been careful to stay clear of the place.

It was said that Dana Burn was one of the eeriest places on Amoi, that the dead walked at night and that their moans could be heard echoing throughout the immense underground structure.

As he thought about these rumors, it was almost as if he could hear Iason's laugh. "Pet. Surely you do not believe such foolishness." And then the Blondie would give him some long-winded lecture on the ontology of phantoms and how they were a scientific impossibility.

Feeling ironically comforted by this imaginary conversation with his Master, Riki now felt bold enough to brave at least one night at the ruins. The question now was how to get there. His eyes gravitated to the store window he was passing, and there, by pure chance, he beheld his answer in the window display: a hoverbike.

Encouraged, and feeling as though his luck was about to turn, Riki slipped inside and immediately hailed the attendant.

"I'll take that bike," he announced, pointing to the display.

The shopkeeper, a Tanaguran native with dark violet hair named Goda, appraised him for a moment, looking decidedly unenthusiastic about helping him.

"Didn't you hear me?" Riki demanded.

"We don't serve *mongrels*," he replied, gifting him with a look of utter disdain. "Go back to Ceres."

Now Riki unzipped his jacket, his golden collar, shined to stunning brilliance, immediately garnering the man's attention.

"My Master will be *very* displeased that you refused to wait on me," he answered, raising his chin proudly. "Wait until I tell him how you treated me!"

As soon as he saw the initials on the collar, Goda became alarmed, his face going pale. "Are you—that is, by any chance, might you possibly be Lord Iason Mink's pet?"

"I am."

"Forgive me," Goda stepped forward, his manner completely altered. "How stupid of me! You're Sir Riki, then?"

"Right. *Sir* Riki," the mongrel agreed.

"Yes, of course! The famous mongrel! I should have known the minute I saw you: in fact, I was just thinking to myself how remarkably handsome you were, for a mongrel—I mean, what I meant to say is, you have a very *exotic* look about you, I can see exactly why Lord Mink might choose you."

"Uh huh."

"And certainly, as Lord Mink's pet, you're *most* welcome here. Most welcome, indeed! Ah...yes...your inquiry: the 6500 Supernova. This just came in from Xeron. She's a beauty, isn't she? And she's fast. In fact—"

"Are these temperature-controlled?" Riki interrupted, pointing to the storage compartments beneath the seat.

"Of course, of course. And they're independent, so you can have one heated and the other cooled."

"Fine. I'll take it. And a helmet. That one." Riki pointed randomly to the first one he saw.

"I must say, you make up your mind very quickly," Goda laughed.

"I only wish all my customers were as easy to please."

"Do you have any generator heaters?"

"Yes, in fact, right over there." The man pointed to a display of heaters in varying sizes and models next to a shelf of miscellaneous camping equipment and riding gear. Riki seized one of the compact generator models, along with a pair of leather riding gloves, a lantern, an all-wave radio with interception capabilities, and a knife.

"I'll have to speak with Lord Mink for permission to sell you that," Goda warned, nodding toward the knife.

"Oh." Riki put it back on the display, shrugging. "Never mind, then. I don't want to bother him with something so silly."

Smiling, the attendant nodded. "Then...will this be all?"

"Yes."

"That comes to 549,871 credits. Please put your chin on the rest here for a retinal scan."

Riki did so, and for a tense moment, both he and Goda waited to see if such a huge purchase would clear. His ID immediately popped up, listing an impressive, open-ended credit portfolio, with 750,000 credits available immediately.

Goda smiled. "Your Master must think a lot of you, Sir Riki. I don't think I've ever seen a pet with a portfolio like this. In fact, most pets don't have a credit portfolio at all."

"Yeah," Riki answered, feeling a little guilty that he was taking advantage of Iason's generosity to run away from him.

"You still have plenty on your line."

"Hey...can I get some paper credits?"

"Let's see. You have up to 750,000 available for immediate use, which means you have 200,129 remaining you could take out in paper notes."

"Great. I'll take...200,129, then."

"Certainly." Goda eyed him curiously as he counted the notes. "It's odd you'd want paper notes, though. Why don't you just use your credit line?"

"Oh...it's mostly to impress the other pets. You know how they are. They're more awed by wealth they can actually see."

"I see. Well, then, here you are. And these are your keys; take the

first one there, by the door. It's fully charged. Please tell your Master that Goda Bandora sends his regards."

"Sure." Riki stowed away his lantern and the radio in one of the side storage compartments and then gave Goda a parting smile as he pushed his bike outside and got on it. His heart was pounding dreadfully as he started it up, but he pretended not to be in a hurry, lighting up a smoke and giving the shopkeeper the "thumbs up" signal once he realized he was still being watched from inside the shop. He took a few quick puffs of the cigarette before finally tossing it, still lit and barely smoked, into the street. Then he put on his helmet and took off.

He knew he didn't have much time. By now, Katze would be wondering where he was and probably cursing him for being late. But he still needed food and water. He stopped at the first place he saw and rushed in but was immediately detained by the shopkeeper.

"No pets," the man scolded. "Didn't you read the sign?"

"Where can I go, then?" Riki asked.

"Around the corner, and down about five blocks, there's a shop for pets. Cornucopia. Go on, get out." He waved at Riki dismissively with his hand as though shooing away a bug.

"Bastard," the mongrel muttered, as he left.

"What did you say to me?" the shopkeeper called after him. "Hey! Who's your Master? Naughty pet!"

Riki jumped on his bike and sped off before the irate man could accost him, stopping a few minutes later at the shop he had mentioned, Cornucopia. Once again he hurried inside, only to be confronted by yet another arrogant and rude store attendant.

"Hey! *No running!* Bad pet!"

Ignoring him, Riki gathered as much food as he thought would fit in his bike storage, along with a case of Electrolyte. He quickly made his way to the checkout but had to stand in line behind two female pets. They looked back at him, whispering to one another and giggling.

"Got something to say? Why don't you just say it?" he challenged.

"You look like a *mongrel*," one replied contemptuously. "Don't stand so close to us."

“Look at you,” he snorted, “perched so high, as though you’re any better than me.”

“I’m Emerald, the pet of Lord Norju Faire, and she’s Elisif, the pet of Lord Konami Sung,” the female replied arrogantly.

“Yeah? Well, I’m Riki, the pet of Lord Iason Mink, and he can kick both your Masters’ asses any day or have them shipped out of Eos, whichever I tell him to do.” The mongrel shifted the items he was carrying so that his pet collar, which had been hidden behind his purchases, was in plain sight.

The girls fell silent, gaping at him in disbelief. Lord Mink’s pet? He couldn’t be serious! Almost at the same time, they both finally noticed his collar and, seeing the initials there, which confirmed his assertion, they then regarded him with alarm.

“He is Lord Mink’s pet,” Elisif whispered.

“Please excuse us,” Emerald murmured. “We were terribly rude.”

“Yes, you were.”

“So it’s true: you really *are* a mongrel. I thought those were all just stories!”

“You won’t tell your Master, will you?” Elisif pleaded.

“Oh, I’ll tell him,” he answered, leaning forward, “unless you both come with me right now and let me fuck you, one after the other. Plus one of you has to suck me, and I get to fuck the other one up the ass.”

The pets looked so horrified at his threat that Riki had to laugh.

“Nah, I’m just teasing. But you’d better be nicer from now on. You never know who you might be insulting when you’re rude to total strangers.”

Frightened, the girls quickly paid for their merchandise and hurried out of the store.

The shop attendant glared at him. “I heard what you said to those pets,” he scolded. “That’s not appropriate conversation and you know it. I ought to call your Master and let him know how you behaved in here, running through the store and then frightening those females.”

Riki shrugged. “Call him if you want. But he won’t be too pleased you bothered him with something so trivial. He’s got that huge Trade Convention coming up, you know, and he could care less what I said to a couple of arrogant little pets.”

The attendant considered this, feeling uncertain. Like everyone else in Tanagura, he had heard stories about Lord Mink's temper. Although typically rather impassive, Iason was a force to be reckoned with when provoked. It was said that the prominent Head of the Syndicate fawned over his mongrel pet, perhaps even *paired* with him. If that were really true, he might well be offended at any criticism leveled at his beloved favorite pet. Why risk irritating the great Blondie? Perhaps the pet was right: the matter wasn't important enough to disturb him.

The man shook his head, ringing up the order without further comment.

Riki left the store in a deliberately unhurried manner, stopping nonchalantly at the door and pretending to look at an advertisement posted on the wall for nipple rings. In fact, he was quite anxious to get going, but he was worried about the store attendant finding his behavior suspicious, especially after confronted so angrily by him. He could feel the man's eyes burning into him as he stood there, so he intentionally forced himself to delay his exit. Finally, the attendant looked away and seemed absorbed in a magazine hologram, which was rotating a new series of A-class pets coming to the auction-house.

Once he was outside, the mongrel immediately stowed his purchases in the compartments at the rear of his bike and sped off, making for the freeway. By now Katze was probably pissed; perhaps he had even gone to look for him, or had called Iason. Riki suspected that the Blondie would attempt to look for him privately first. If that failed, he would no doubt issue an alert for him, maybe even with a reward offered for his safe return. He knew he had to get to Dana Burn before that happened. Iason would check his purchase records and discover his hoverbike purchase, and then everyone would be on the lookout for it.

He realized then that he should have picked something less conspicuous than a 6500 Supernova, which was a top-of-the-line, brand new model that was already attracting attention. The bike levitated off the ground about three feet, emitting a bright neon light from its underside down to the road, which made him highly visible—an excellent safety feature that, unfortunately, was not the best choice

for a time like this, when he was hoping to avoid being noticed. The light slowly shifted between colors, running the entire spectrum from deep purple to crimson and orange-gold. Although it was pretty, it was also unusual. It was more likely he would be remembered because of the colorful lights. Riki fumbled with the controls until he managed to find a setting that was less flashy: just a simple neon green glow.

Speeding down the freeway made it seem even colder, and Riki began to shiver. Cursing, he realized he should have made one more stop for heavier clothing or blankets of some kind. He could tell from the overcast sky that it was going to snow. At least he had bought the heater; he realized now he would truly need it.

He took the exit to Urus but veered off the road at the quarry, going cross-country toward the ruins—or at least, where he thought the ruins were. Sure enough, it wasn't long before he saw an unusual domed building in the distance. The copper of the dome had weathered into a lovely light turquoise patina, which was stunning against the falling snow. As he neared the impressive old structure of Dana Burn, he marveled at its beauty, feeling foolish that he had lacked the courage to explore it until then. It would have been the perfect hangout for Bison, he realized. And it was close to the ocean, too.

Feeling excited, he brought his bike to a stop just outside the building and began looking for a way inside. This first challenge was easily resolved when he discovered the door panel and keypad, but he was disappointed when he couldn't get the panel to take his code.

He shook his head, once again feeling foolish. Of course his identification code wouldn't be recognized by something dating from the Revolution. But how was he going to get inside?

He punched in various combinations, including words such as “open” or “dana burn” or “override,” to no avail.

“Fuck,” he muttered. The wind was getting stronger now and the temperature was definitely dropping. Finally, on a whim, he entered one final word: *freedom*.

Amazingly, the door opened!

Thoroughly pleased with himself for cracking the code, he peered

inside the dark interior. It was pitch black, and completely silent. Although he was anxious for some shelter from the razor-sharp chill of the wind, he found he was decidedly less enthusiastic about actually entering the old shelter. He couldn't help but worry that there might still be human remains inside: what if the shelter was filled with old skeletons or scary body parts, preserved by the airtight seal of the structure?

His teeth were now chattering loudly from the cold.

"Dana Burn is *not* haunted, pet," he could almost hear Iason say. "Surely you don't believe such foolishness."

Once again he obtained comfort just imagining how the Blondie would respond to his fears. No matter what might be inside, he wasn't going to dwell on it. If he did, he would be standing outside in the cold forever. He forced himself to think, instead, about something more pleasant, such as actually fucking the two arrogant, though admittedly pretty, pets he had met at Cornucopia, making them cry and apologize over and over for their rudeness. This fantasy made him smile and helped relax him.

He returned to his bike and retrieved his lantern, turning it on. Its blue light came on smoothly and silently, and for a moment he was distracted by it, wondering how the lantern worked, for it seemed to have no energy source whatsoever.

Remembering then, with no small bit of relief, that he still carried the laser Iason had given him, he retrieved it and slowly entered the building, holding up the lantern to light his way. He knew it was ridiculous to arm himself against the potential threat of animated skeletons or phantoms, but he felt better just carrying the weapon.

The lantern was surprisingly bright, and Riki could see further ahead than he had expected. All the same, he decided almost immediately that he didn't want to venture too far inside; at least for now, he would settle for the first place he came to that wasn't littered with skulls or anything that moved.

He found such a room fairly quickly: it housed a table, a cot, some old books, and a few overturned benches and chairs. Besides that, the room was surprisingly barren. Riki explored it for a few moments, thrilled when he found another light source, for, amazingly, the

structure still boasted an intact, old-fashioned generator. Although the lights that flickered on still left the room bathed in shadows, they were certainly better than nothing, and together with his lantern, the light made the room far less eerie than he had initially feared it might be. It was cold, but at least it was shelter from the elements. Riki returned to his bike and retrieved the rest of his supplies, setting up his camp. For a while, anyway, this would be his home.

His thoughts drifted to Katze. He frowned, feeling horribly guilty for the trouble he had no doubt already caused him. Katze's parting words, "I'm trusting you, Riki," now plagued him, and he fervently hoped that Iason would not be *too* hard on him, once he discovered that the eunuch had allowed him to leave the hospital unattended.

By now, Iason certainly knew that he had disappeared. Riki instinctively shuddered as he visualized his reaction to this news. He could imagine many different scenarios, but in all of them one thing was the same: the Blondie's fury.



KATZE STOOD UP WHEN THE ELEVATOR door opened, ready to scold Riki for taking so long to return. When an orderly emerged instead, he turned away, scowling. He was now more than just annoyed with the mongrel: he was decidedly *pissed*. Riki was getting a taming when he returned. Three strikes—no, *six*!

As he stewed over the matter, his gaze drifted to Lord Am and Yui, who sat in the waiting room just across the hall. He was surprised at how gentle the Blondie seemed with his attendant. Raoul was speaking to him about something and, Katze couldn't help but notice, he had moved in very *close* to Yui, whispering into his ear. Yui looked terrified, clutching his Master's sleeve uncertainly as Raoul reached down to brush a strand of hair from his eyes. This was hardly the same Blondie who had always rather intimidated Katze, the one who had abducted Riki and hurt his precious Daryl.

He would never completely forgive Lord Am for hurting Daryl. But at the same time, his respect for Elites was so deeply ingrained in him that it was difficult even to acknowledge feelings that ran contrary to

societal expectations. His anger was detached from the rest of him, floating off in some isolated, impotent place, and though he was aware of it, he did not act on it. His demeanor towards Raoul would always be appropriate, just as he now submitted to Iason's every demand, with the occasional—though thankfully infrequent—lapse in judgment, such as when he agreed to perform fellatio on Riki or when he foolishly suggested the mongrel join him and Daryl for an afterwards much regretted threesome. In the grand hierarchy of castes that formed the social world on Amoi, the eunuch knew his place and could not even imagine anything different.

Katze cursed Riki again: he had been gone for at least a half hour, far longer than it took to smoke one cigarette. He decided it was time to go down and fetch him, as well as give him a much-deserved taming. He took the chains with him—Riki would definitely be putting those back on. But when he reached the main level, the mongrel was not to be found. He walked outside, scanning the streets.

No sign of Riki.

Frustrated, he tried the canteen, and then the gift shop, with no luck either place. He sighed. Perhaps he had just missed him, and Riki had already returned to the waiting room. He went back up to Reconstruction to find out.

But the mongrel hadn't returned.

Katze sat down. He was now officially worried, though he was trying not to panic. He didn't want to search for Riki again until he'd heard from Heiku; the doctor would be returning any moment with an update on how the surgery had gone. He waited anxiously, every minute that passed making him even more annoyed and worried. What was Riki up to?

A thought was starting to take shape in his mind that the auburn-haired youth did not want to acknowledge. A dreadful thought. What if something had happened to him? Or—perhaps more likely if a little less alarming—suppose the mongrel had taken advantage of his leniency, using the opportunity to run off somewhere? It would be just like him to spend the day roaming around Tanagura, going from one open club to another. Iason, he knew, rarely let him go out. The opportunity may have proved irresistible, even though punishment

invariably waited at the end of such an adventure.

“Dammit, Riki,” he muttered under his breath.

He sighed. At least the mongrel couldn’t get far. Katze would have to call Iason, though, to get his location, and he knew the Blondie would *not* be pleased that he had allowed Riki to wander off. He would be in for some punishment, for sure.

Cursing, he stood up and began to pace, unable to remain still. Thankfully, Heiku then returned to the waiting room.

Katze rushed over to him, anxious for the news.

The surgeon smiled. “He did just fine. No problems whatsoever. As I mentioned before, he’ll be in recovery for quite awhile—he probably won’t wake until later this afternoon. You’re welcome to sit with him in about an hour, but don’t try to wake him up.”

Katze nodded. “I’ll come back in an hour, then.”

Lord Quiahtenon excused himself, next going across the hall to talk with Raoul and Yui.

Though relieved that the surgery had gone well, Katze was now furious with Riki. He dreaded contacting Iason; if the Blondie was angry enough, he might even get out his whip again. The thought of enduring such a hellish experience a second time was enough to make him shake as he put in the call to the Mink household.

“Iason Mink,” came the silky soft, almost sultry answer.

“It’s Katze. I’m sorry to bother you with this, but...Riki’s gone.”

“What do you mean, he’s *gone*?” Iason demanded.

“I mean, I’m sorry, but I let him go downstairs to smoke about an hour ago, and he hasn’t come back.”

“What?!” Lord Mink yelled so loudly that Katze nearly dropped the phone.

“I’m sorry. Can you pull up his tracer and find out where he is?”

A long silence followed. “Katze,” the Blondie said, finally, his voice shaking with anger, “I left Riki in your hands. I certainly don’t remember giving you permission to let him leave your sight.”

“Yes, Sir,” Katze murmured, fighting back his own anger.

“And now we most definitely have a problem. Riki isn’t wearing his pet ring, so there’s no way to trace him.”

“Holy shit.” Riki wasn’t wearing his ring? Katze digested this new

information with no small bit of alarm. This changed everything. A street-smart mongrel like Riki the Dark wouldn't be easy to find without a tracer, or at least, not right away. But why wasn't he wearing the ring? *And why hadn't Iason told him?*

"What about the tracer you gave him last week?"

"I already took that back from him."

"We should put out an alert," Katze suggested, after an awkward pause.

"No," Iason sighed, "I want to try and handle this privately first. I'm sending the brothers to you—Odi, too. If the four of you can't find him before sunset, I'll issue an alert then."

"Iason, again, I'm so sorry—"

"Spare me the apology. You'll be punished, Katze, whether or not you're sorry."

"Yes, Sir." Katze was now so angry, he felt like throwing the handheld across the room.

"Find him," the Blondie barked, before abruptly terminating the call.



"IT'S ALMOST TIME, YUI," LORD AM whispered, when he saw Heiku speaking with Katze. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Yui answered softly. He was frightened, but he was also excited. Soon he would be sexually complete and able to fully respond to the Blondie's touch. "Master?"

"Yes?"

"You are good to me, to do this."

Raoul smiled. "It will give me nearly as much pleasure as it gives you, Yui."

Lord Quiahtenon approached them, looking serious. He addressed his remarks primarily to the Blondie. "We're ready for you now. As I told you, this procedure is a bit tricky, so it will take a good two to three hours. Then he'll be in recovery for about six. He'll need to spend a few nights here. After that, his recovery will depend on which route you want to take. Have you decided?"

“Yes,” Raoul replied. “We’ll go the natural route. No Accelerator.”

“Very well: in that case, it will probably be about six weeks before he’s sexually functional.”

Now Yui, who had not been consulted about this, tugged on Lord Am’s sleeve.

“Yes, Yui?”

“If we use Accelerator, how long will it take before I’m ready?”

Raoul looked to Heiku for the answer.

“A few days,” the physician replied. “But I must warn you: the treatments are very painful.”

“I want to use Accelerator,” Yui announced.

“No, Yui,” Raoul answered gently. “You don’t need to go through that.”

“But...please, Master? I want to.”

The Blondie paused for a moment, studying him. “Are you sure?”

Yui nodded. “I don’t want to wait six weeks.”

Lord Am turned to Heiku. “What if he can’t tolerate the treatments? Does he have to continue anyway?”

“No,” Heiku answered. “Fortunately, we can stop the Acceleration any time. He’ll benefit no matter what, but the length of his recovery will depend on how many sessions he actually completes.”

“Then, we choose Acceleration,” Raoul decided.

Heiku nodded, smiling then at the attendant. “You’re very brave, Yui. So, would you like to see what your Master has picked out for you?”

Yui considered this offer for a moment and then shook his head. The thought of seeing his future member lying on some tray or ice chest was simply too disturbing. “No, thank you,” he murmured, his voice trembling. “I’ll wait until it’s on.”

Both Blondies laughed openly at this.

“Then, you’ll come with me now, Yui,” Lord Quiahtenon directed.

The attendant turned to his Master. “Will you be there when I wake up?”

“Of course,” Raoul answered with a comforting smile.

Next Yui gave his Master a hug before following the physician. Raoul released him and watched him go, his smile fading into a

worried frown.

“Fuck!” Katze suddenly shouted, snapping his handheld shut angrily. “Dammit, Riki!”

“You’re rather noisy over there,” Raoul commented. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there’s a problem, all right. Riki has run off somewhere.”

Lord Am was actually surprised at this. He had spotted the mongrel when they’d first arrived but now realized he had not seen him in some time. Still, it was hardly surprising he hadn’t really noticed Riki’s whereabouts, as he had been careful to avoid even looking over at him, the incident at the Taming Tower still looming too fresh in his mind. Raoul’s punishment at Iason’s hands in front of the mongrel had been mortifying, and he was almost fearful Riki might even comment on it.

“Have you alerted Iason?”

“I just spoke with him. He’s...not pleased.”

Smiling at what had to be an understatement, certainly, Raoul sat back down in the waiting room, crossing his legs. “I wouldn’t worry. His pet ring has a tracer; Iason will find him.”

“He’s not wearing it.”

“He’s not wearing what?”

“His pet ring. He’s not wearing it.”

Lord Am was utterly puzzled. Why wouldn’t the mongrel be wearing his identification ring? “Well, he can’t have gone far. Aren’t you going to go look for him?”

“Iason is sending his bodyguards. I’ll wait for them.”

Raoul then noticed the chains on the chair next to Katze. “You allowed him to remove his chains?”

The eunuch refused to answer.

The Blondie smiled, correctly interpreting his silence. Katze was in for some punishment: that much was certain. He felt completely unconcerned over Riki’s disappearance, certain that the runaway pet would be caught, and very quickly, most likely. In fact, Lord Am was secretly thrilled with the mongrel’s unbelievable stupidity, knowing it meant he would be thoroughly punished.



LORD MINK SNAPPED HIS HANDHELD SHUT, shaking with emotion. He was so furious with Katze, he could hardly see straight. More than this, he was dreadfully worried about Riki as he considered the possibilities. What if he had been abducted?

He summoned Odi, Askel and Freyn and apprised them of the situation. The three bodyguards, finally having something serious to do, immediately moved into action. Odi flipped open his handheld database and brought up a holographic projection of the vicinity around the hospital.

“Let’s assume he’s been gone an hour. We’ll divide the search area into quadrants, moving inward from these points,” Odi suggested, indicating where he thought each of them should start out. “I’ll take this area, and you two take the southern points. Katze will start there, at the Old Tower.”

“We should take separate vehicles,” Askel remarked.

“Good idea.”

“Should I go, too?” Tai offered.

Odi looked to Iason.

“Yes, Tai. That would be helpful,” the Blondie replied, feeling, suddenly, rather weary. He brought a hand to his head, feeling another headache coming on.

“Why don’t you come with me, then,” Odi murmured.

Tai nodded.

Now Odi hesitated. “I’m not sure if it’s such a good idea to leave you completely alone, Iason.”

The Blondie dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “Go. I insist.”

“Yes, Sir,” the bodyguard answered, with a slight bow. The four of them hurried off, leaving the Blondie alone to his thoughts.

Lord Mink, who was typically rather cool-headed in any situation, was starting to panic as the reality of Riki’s disappearance set in. His biggest fear was that something had happened to his beloved pet, that he had somehow been identified and detained, perhaps for ransom purposes. In truth, it was primarily out of his fear for the mongrel’s safety that he kept him on such a short leash. Iason knew that he had

enemies and those who meant him harm. As with anyone in a position of great power and influence, especially with the wealth he personally boasted, Iason was a target. Thus, Riki was a potential target, as well.

But when he pulled up Riki's purchase logs to see if any clues lay there, he brought to light a whole new perspective on what had actually transpired. He was stunned to see that, at a shop called Goda's Post, the mongrel had already acquired a bike, a heater, a lantern, and an all-wave radio with interception capabilities. In addition, he had taken out 200,129 credits in paper.

The first thing Iason did was put in a priority call, using an Independent channel, to Goda's Post.

The shopkeeper answered, sounding very happy. "Thank you for calling Goda's Post! Goda Bandora speaking. How may I help you?"

"This is Iason Mink," the Blondie stated.

At first, Goda answered him with complete silence. Then, "Lord Mink! Goodness! What a pleasure, indeed! I must say, I was deeply honored to wait on your remarkable pet a few minutes ago—I certainly hope he didn't report anything negative about my service. It was all a big misunderstanding, I assure you. You see, when he first walked in—"

"I haven't talked to Riki," Iason interrupted. "The reason I'm calling is that my pet has disappeared. I'm trying to sort out exactly what happened, and I've just pulled up his purchase logs."

"Ah, I see," Goda answered nervously. "I hope you approve of his choices? His portfolio had no restrictions and accepted the purchase right away. I confess, I wondered at the time if it would, considering what the total came to. That is, what I *meant* to say is, our prices are the very best in Tanagura for the quality of the merchandise, but your pet did indeed select the most expensive bike in the store, I'm afraid."

"I can see that. I have no problem with the purchase or the price; my pet is free to buy whatever pleases him."

"You are quite generous with him, you are, indeed. I must say, I was stunned by his portfolio! I don't believe I've ever seen one quite like it! An open-ended credit line? But then, I suppose that's to be expected from *you*, Lord Mink. Only the very best for *your* pet, I

should imagine! And Riki does have very good taste, yes, very good taste, indeed! Quite an eye for the finest!”

“Did he come into the store alone?” Lord Mink asked, ignoring his remarks.

“Yes, he was alone. And because he was a mongrel, you see—I didn’t notice his collar right away, unfortunately—I’m afraid I may not have welcomed him as I should have, at first. I hope you understand. I thought he was a daytripper, of course, with nothing but mischief on his mind, though I did wonder how he managed to sneak into Eos. It never occurred to me that he might be your famous pet! So, you can imagine my surprise when—”

“Did he say where he was going?” Iason interrupted.

“No, he didn’t.”

“Did you happen to see which direction he went when he left?”

“Let’s see, yes, I believe I did. He was heading west. You say he has disappeared? Going for a spin on the new bike, I should imagine. She’s very fast, a true joy to ride. He’s lost track of the hour, no doubt.”

“Riki did not have my permission to be out on the streets today. So, you can imagine *my* surprise when I pulled up his purchase logs after he disappeared.”

“I see. He didn’t have your permission? But, you said earlier you had no problem with his purchase, is that correct?” Goda pressed nervously.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think you’re understanding the situation. I have no problem with the purchase itself. You needn’t worry about the sale. My concern is over the nature of the items he acquired at your store. He bought the sort of gear one might need for a camping trip. And he bought a hoverbike. Given that he has disappeared, perhaps you can appreciate my concern.”

There was a long pause. “Oh dear,” Goda said finally. “I see your point, I do, indeed. Goodness. He didn’t buy a tent, however, I did notice that. He won’t last long out in the elements without one, the cold will drive him to shelter, I guarantee you that much. He’ll be home before much longer, I’ll wager. There’s quite a storm coming! Ah...I should tell you, that he also expressed interest in acquiring a

knife, but when I told him that I would need your permission for the sale, he said he didn't want to bother you with it."

"I'm sure he did." Lord Mink couldn't help but smile, imagining Riki's reaction when Goda had threatened to contact him. "Was there anything else he looked at?"

"No. He was only in the store a few minutes. He made his mind up very quickly. In fact, I praised him about this. I didn't realize, of course, why he might have been in such a hurry. Lord Mink, let me just say that I'm so dreadfully sorry if I've done anything to displease you. That is the last thing I would want to do, Sir."

The Blondie sighed. "You've done nothing wrong at all, Goda. You were good to wait on him and give him exactly what he asked for."

"Thank you, Sir."

"However, I do need a favor from you."

"Yes? Anything, my Lord, anything at all!"

"Please contact me if you remember any other pertinent details about his visit, or if you find out anything more about his movements. I'm sending you my direct contact information, as we speak. That relay will go directly to my personal handheld. Perhaps you could ask around to see if anyone else saw him? You know the shops in the vicinity better than I do and which ones allow unattended pets to enter. My guess is Riki might have made some more purchases using paper credits."

"That's very smart thinking, I must say. You're right, he did take out quite a few paper notes, true enough. Certainly, Sir, I'll be happy to make some inquiries. Ah...yes, I've just received direct access to your private line! Direct access to the Head of the Syndicate! Goodness! What an honor! I assure you, Sir, I won't abuse the privilege. You are quite safe to send me your private relay, quite safe indeed. Once again, I apologize for my...for my part in all this."

"No apology is necessary. Good afternoon."

Iason ended the call, sitting back in his chair and closing his eyes. Now there was no question in his mind as to what had happened. Riki hadn't been abducted: by all the evidence, it appeared he had run away.

The Blondie found it difficult to control his emotions, now that he

knew the truth. He was furious with his pet, but more than this, he felt extraordinarily hurt and puzzled over his decision to run away. After returning from his week in Ceres, Riki had spoken some very special words to him, making a declaration that Iason had, indeed, been treasuring in his heart and had not stopped thinking about since: *"I don't belong in Ceres anymore,"* the mongrel had told him, adding sweetly, *"I belong with you."*

Riki had even given him a gift, a gesture that had truly touched the Blondie. In fact, he was wearing the earrings at that very moment. They were flawless, iridescent Aristian crystals that shifted colors with his slightest movement. He absolutely adored them, not only because they were unique and exquisitely beautiful, just the sort of thing he might have picked out for himself, but because his pet had given them to him. He removed his gloves and touched one of them, twirling the earring slowly between his fingertips as he pondered Riki's actions.

So...what had happened? Had Riki changed his mind about the way he felt? The big question was: why? *Why had he run away?*

Lord Mink reviewed the morning, trying to determine if anything in the mongrel's behavior provided some clues. Riki *had* been tamed, true enough, but that was hardly anything new. He had, admittedly, seemed out of sorts in the vehicle on the way to the hospital. Iason remembered then that he hadn't eaten any breakfast and that he had been upset that there was no coffee. These seemed, to the Blondie, to be trivial concerns, surely not cause to run away?

Oddly, Riki hadn't even resisted when Iason put his chains on him, for once. He was forced to consider the possibility that the mongrel had been playing him for some time, pretending to feel more than he really did, when he was simply waiting for an opportunity to bolt—an opportunity that had finally presented itself that morning at the hospital.

Lord Mink could hardly bear to come to terms with this possibility. He felt devastated at the thought that Riki might have been lying to him for quite some time.

Yet he had to concede that his pet had *not* voluntarily returned to Eos as instructed after his week in Ceres. No, he had missed his

curfew, and Iason had been forced to fetch him.

The Blondie pushed his emotions aside, forcing himself to focus on the task at hand: how was he going to find the mongrel? Where had he gone? He reviewed Riki's purchase logs again. What was the heater for? Did that mean he expected to be outside? He gazed out the window, frowning. Goda's remarks about the cold worried him. He had mentioned there was a snowstorm coming. True enough, the snow had already begun to fall, swirling down upon the city in spirals of cold beauty.

Lord Mink rose and stood in front of the great arching window, his hands clasped behind his back as he looked out over Tanagura. Surely his pet intended to find shelter. The thought of him shivering in an alley somewhere was more than he could bear.

As angry and hurt as he was, Iason could not help but admire how clever his pet had been to ask for paper credits, and to make his purchases so quickly after deciding to run. In fact, as he was speaking to Goda, Iason had entered an alert on his portfolio to detain him, should the mongrel attempt to make further purchases, although he suspected now that Riki would not attempt to use his credit line for this very reason. No, he was too smart for that. He could live on those notes for quite some time—months, perhaps even years, depending on how frugal he was. And with the hoverbike, he could go anywhere.

The mongrel's cleverness, however, was also a source of sadness to the Blondie. It suggested that he was taking the moment seriously. He wasn't after just an afternoon of pleasure in the city, for instance. Riki had truly run away and was taking measures to ensure he wouldn't be caught. After everything they had shared together—indeed, after how far they had come since the mongrel's initial arrival at the penthouse, Iason was terribly hurt by his actions.

"Riki," he whispered, his throat constricting painfully even as he spoke the word.

In truth, the Blondie was having a hard time believing that Riki *had* run away, even though the evidence pointed decidedly to that conclusion. They had shared deep moments of intimacy together, he was *sure* of it! He had been convinced that they were making definite progress, that Riki was beginning to accept his role as his pet. The

mongrel had even mentioned the word *love*, more than once. Even when he had been evasive about his feelings, he had, in both word and action, implied that he felt real affection for him.

But perhaps Iason had been deceived.

Taming Riki had, without question, been a long, grueling, frustrating process, yet the Blondie had begun to hope that they were nearing the final stages of his training. The mongrel had given him reason to believe this, surely. He had not been imagining it. Or had he?

Had it all been just a sham?

But...what about his sexual responsiveness? Riki couldn't manufacture that: his body spoke even louder than his words, proving that his ardor was genuine. Even so, Lord Mink was left with the troubling possibility that, though the mongrel *did* respond to him sexually, his heart had remained cool and distant, and that, all along, Riki had spoken words that weren't true, words that were designed to fool him into complacency.

What other conclusion could he come to? Riki *had* run away. At the very least, Iason had to accept that the mongrel wasn't happy as his pet, and this hurt him exceedingly, more than if a real blade had been plunged into his chest.

He forced himself to take a deep breath. So, perhaps he had been deceived. Perhaps there was a good deal of work still to be done. They had taken a big step backwards with this latest development, no question. But, try as he could, Iason could not bring himself to give up on the mongrel. No, he wanted him back again, even if his worst fears were true and Riki did not return his love. He still wanted him, even knowing this, and even though his heart was aching.

His handheld began to chime, and the Blondie retrieved it from his pocket, answering immediately.

"Lord Mink."

"This is Goda Bandora. I did some inquiries for you."

"Yes?"

"You were right. He made more purchases at Cornucopia, which is not too far from here. The shopkeeper can't remember precisely what he bought, as he used paper credits, just as you suspected he would."

“I see.”

“The shopkeeper also mentioned that, uh, I’m sorry to tell you this, but, he said that Riki was rude and disrespectful. He was running in the store and he apparently also said some inappropriate things to some female pets.”

Iason was not surprised at this report. If anything, it only convinced him that it was the mongrel they were talking about.

“Did he know the identity of the pets?”

“Yes. They belonged to Lord Sung and Lord Faire.”

“Thank you, Goda,” the Blondie replied. “Let me know if you hear anything else.”

“I will, Sir. Let me just say, it is an honor to—”

Lord Mink terminated the call, too impatient to deal with the man’s longwinded obsequiousness. His heart had sunk upon hearing that one of the pets belonged to the Headmaster. He dreaded contacting the Blondie, for he would have to tell him that Riki had run away, and he was not looking forward to Konami’s remarks on the subject. Lord Sung had made no secret of the fact that he thought keeping the mongrel was foolish. It was perhaps the only matter that had ever divided them, save, of course, Iason’s relationship with Raoul during his Academy days.

He decided to contact Norju Faire first. He had few dealings with the Blondie and only at the Syndicate, though he knew him to be of a pleasant enough disposition generally, if at times a bit arrogant.

Lord Faire sounded surprised to hear from him. “Iason? Heavens, it’s been awhile, hasn’t it? What can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I have a situation here. My pet has, unfortunately, run away. It seems he spoke with your pet just a few minutes ago, and I’d like to know what they talked about, if possible. Emerald, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right. Just a moment, let me see what I can find out.”

“Thank you.”

Iason waited, straining to hear the animated conversation going on in the background, but he couldn’t make anything out.

“Yes, Emerald just confirmed that they spoke,” Norju reported finally. “I had some difficulty getting anything out of her until I

retrieved my taming stick and threatened to use it. She pulled quite a look when I told her you were on the channel, I can tell you that much. From what I can discern, it appears she and Elisif insulted Riki, not knowing who he was. In her defense, I must tell you Emerald claims your pet said some shocking things to them of a...well, to be frank, of a rather vulgar, sexual nature."

"Yes, the shopkeeper confirmed that," Lord Mink replied smoothly. "I apologize for Riki's conduct."

"And I for Emerald's," Norju answered agreeably. "She claims they apologized when they discovered he was your pet. I assure you, she *will* be punished for her rudeness. I trained her better than that. A good turn over my knee should do the trick, I think. I've never had to give her a real spanking before, but the day has come, I fear."

"I don't suppose he said anything to them regarding where he was going? Does she remember what he purchased?"

"I'm afraid not," Lord Faire answered. "I asked her both questions. She says they only spoke for a few minutes, and they left the shop before he did."

"I see. Thank you for your assistance in this matter, Norju. Again, I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

"It's no trouble whatsoever. I hope you find him soon, Iason."

"Thank you."

Lord Mink terminated the call, debating whether or not it was necessary to contact Headmaster Konami, now that he had spoken to Lord Faire. It didn't sound as though the encounter provided any clues as to the mongrel's movements.

Nevertheless, he did not entirely trust that Emerald was telling the truth. Perhaps she had left something out, or perhaps Lord Sung's pet would remember some other detail, such as what Riki had purchased.

With great reluctance, he finally put in the call to the Headmaster.

Konami sounded delighted to hear from him, at least initially.

"Iason! What a pleasure to hear from you! I hope you are well?"

"I confess, I have been better," the Blondie replied.

"Oh? I'm sorry to hear that. What's troubling you?"

"Riki has run away."

There was a short pause. "Ah. I see." Lord Sung sighed. "I have to

tell you, I'm not the least bit surprised. But, surely it won't take you long to locate him? You have his coordinates, I should think?"

"No," Iason admitted. "He wasn't wearing his pet ring."

"Whatever do you mean? I'm not following you. Why wouldn't he be wearing his ring?"

"I allowed him to take it off when I let him spend a week in Ceres," the Blondie explained.

"And you didn't put it back on him immediately upon his return? Iason, I'm surprised at you," Konami scolded.

"Yes, I know. I trusted him, I suppose, when I shouldn't have."

"I hope this tells you something about the wisdom of keeping a mongrel as a pet. You really ought to let him go, Iason. This might be the perfect time to move on and acquire a different pet. You've seen one by now that appeals to you, surely? What about that new shipment of exotic pets from Gardan? I know you have an eye for the unusual."

"I don't want any other pet. I only want Riki."

"Jupiter's sake, Iason, don't be so obstinate! You're the Head of the Syndicate. You ought to be flaunting a new pet every year. What does it say about your opinion of the auction-house stock, when you reject them all in favor of a mongrel you pulled off the streets?"

"Headmaster, I didn't call to debate whether or not I should keep Riki," Lord Mink said softly. "I'm keeping him. Now I just want to find him."

"Well, you'll have to issue an alert, of course," Konami pointed out. "Do I have to remind you of basic pet administration laws? Jupiter won't be pleased when she learns of this. In fact, she probably knows about it now, as I'm sure she's listening."

"I'm using an Independent channel," the Blondie confessed.

"What? Jupiter's sake, Iason! You know Independent channels are illegal! What are you thinking? I ought to terminate this call, right now."

"Please, I was hoping to handle this privately, if at all possible. I didn't see any other option except to use an off-line frequency, for the sake of discretion."

"That doesn't make it acceptable for you to break the General

Code! And you *won't* be able to handle this privately. If you want to find him, there's only one way: issue an alert, which, might I remind you, *you are required to do, by law, within 26 hours after a pet has gone missing.*"

"I know the law, Headmaster. I was simply hoping to find him before resorting to an alert," Lord Mink explained.

"I can understand why you're hesitating," Konami remarked. "There's enough talk about you as it is. The Channel will be buzzing about this for weeks. Perhaps you ought to give Zanbar Su a preemptive call."

"I've approached him more than once about the Channel already, but there's only so much he can do, or so he claims. He refuses to stop broadcasting."

"I daresay he can do more than he lets on. He doesn't have to allow live call-ins, and that's where most of the particularly alarming stories come from. He could do more to *confirm* some of the rumors. I've never once heard him make a retraction. However, in the case of your runaway pet, all of Amoi will know about it anyway, once the alert is issued. How you handle the mongrel's punishment once he's captured, however, may help salvage your reputation. I recommend a Public Whipping. Now, speaking of the Channel—"

"I could never subject Riki to a Public Whipping," Lord Mink interrupted.

"You do realize you're required by law to inflict a minimum amount of serious punishment? Five lashes with a whip, either documented or administered publicly, is the standard option."

"I seem to remember another option," Iason murmured, frowning.

"If you use another instrument, it's a mandatory 200 strike rule, and the punishment must be recorded and submitted to Registration. They'll append the documentation to his profile and broadcast the session at all Information posts for three days."

"Is the broadcast mandatory?"

"No, you can request an opt-out, but I highly recommend you don't interfere with the broadcast. Officially it serves as a deterrent to other would-be runaway pets, though, admittedly, it's not too often a pet runs away, these days. In fact, the last case of a runaway pet, as I

recall, happened nearly ten years ago, and I'm not entirely sure he was *truly* a runaway."

"You're talking about Yutaku's pet, Dell."

"Yes—now that we all know Yutaku's political views and his stance on pet ownership, I can't help but suspect he simply let Dell go free, probably on Icaria somewhere. I've had my eye on him for some time, and—well, that's neither here nor there, as they say. My point is, pets so rarely run away that Riki's actions reflect poorly on your authority as a Master."

"Forgive me, I thought your point was that I shouldn't interfere with the broadcast because it serves as a deterrent? Now you're saying pets don't usually run away. So, why would such deterrence be necessary?"

Konami paused, and then laughed. "You don't miss a thing, do you? Sharp as a razor, as always, Iason. Let me finish: the reason I *personally* believe you shouldn't interfere with the broadcast is that it will help reestablish your authority, as long as you administer the punishment with a firm hand."

"I see."

"Have you a counting stick?"

"No, I don't—what is it?"

"It's a type of taming stick. I recommend you get one, unless you're prepared to count all 200 strikes. You program in the number of strikes, and it will alert you when the punishment is complete. You'll also need a documentor orb. I suggest the official unit the Pet Academy puts out, as it will automatically relay the recording to Registration. Now, back to the Channel, I meant to ask you before, not that I believe half of the nonsense I hear, but, since the subject has come up, Iason, I have to ask you something. Indeed, I can scarcely bring myself to ask the question, but I'm afraid I must: is it true you engage in sexual congress with Riki?"

Lord Mink closed his eyes. He had been waiting for the question from the Headmaster for a long time. In fact, he was surprised the Blondie hadn't asked him before. "What I do in the privacy of my home is my own affair," he answered carefully. "It doesn't matter whether it's true or not."

“Horseshit,” Lord Sung retorted hotly. “It matters and you know it. You are the leading Blondie of Tanagura, Iason. You are an example to others. Your conduct has repercussions you aren’t even aware of, I daresay. If you’re bedding your own pet, I’ll be blunt: it’s scandalous, and completely unacceptable. Do you have so little respect for me that you’ll not give me a straight answer? Come, now, out with it: is it true, or not?”

Lord Mink hesitated. He considered lying to him, but found that he couldn’t. His respect for the Headmaster went too deep. The very least he deserved was the truth. “Yes,” he stated, finally.

“Yes? I’m sorry?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

There was a long silence. “Iason, I have to tell you, I’m shocked, truly *shocked*,” Konami whispered. “I was sure such talk was pure rubbish! I only asked to document an answer from you, for the record. But you’re saying it’s true? How could you be so foolish? You *must* stop this deviance immediately. Promise me that you will.”

“I can’t make that promise,” Iason said softly.

“You do realize what you’re risking? You could lose everything!”

“I know.”

“Where did I go wrong with you?” Lord Sung lamented. “I blame this on Raoul. He’s the one who first forced you down the path of deviance, all those years ago. I didn’t punish the two of you hard enough, it seems. You learned nothing, you continued to do just as you pleased, and now here you are, taking your own pet!”

“Headmaster, please: let me get to the reason I called. I really must insist. You see, I believe Riki spoke with your Elisif not too long ago, and I’m wondering if she might remember anything from their encounter that would help me find him.”

“How dare you change the subject. I’m not finished reprimanding you.”

“I apologize, but—”

“In fact, I’m tempted to pay you a visit this very moment. I’ll bring my cane,” Lord Sung announced.

“Headmaster,” Iason protested, laughing uneasily.

“Have you forgotten that I’m Head of the Eos Disciplinary Board?”

You think you're above corporal punishment? Let me tell you something: I have the authority to take a layer of your skin off your backside, and don't think I won't. You've just confessed to something so scandalous I can hardly believe it's true. I *should* report this to Jupiter, although I do have the option of resolving disciplinary problems privately, at my own discretion. I was serious, however, when I said I'd bring my cane."

"I understand, but surely this can wait? I told you the truth out of respect for you, but surely you can see that I have other matters on my mind presently. Forgive me, I don't mean to sound impatient or impertinent, but I would truly appreciate it if you could inquire about Riki."

The Headmaster sighed. "I can't deny that you *did* tell me the truth. Thank you for that, Iason. That, at least, is commendable on your part. Hold on."

Lord Mink waited, pacing in front of one of the great arching windows that overlooked Tanagura. It was now snowing furiously: he gazed uneasily out into a sea of endless white, worried.

After a few minutes, Konami spoke again, sounding even more exasperated than before. "Yes, Elisif has just confirmed that she did encounter Riki today at Cornucopia, when she was there with Norju Faire's pet. She also told me, Iason, what he said to them: I can't repeat it, it's so shocking."

"I'm sorry, Headmaster," Lord Mink murmured. "Yes, I've already been informed about that. Riki was very wrong to speak to them in such a fashion."

"I should say so."

"Did she, by any chance, remember anything else?"

"She said he was buying food and drinks."

"I see." Elisif's assertion that Riki had acquired provisions was disheartening. It was further confirmation that he had, indeed, run away, not that Iason had any real doubt about the matter, at this point. "Thank you, Headmaster. I'm sorry to have disturbed you about all this."

"You'll be hearing from me again, I'm afraid, and soon," Lord Sung warned. "If you don't have the sense to modify your conduct for your

own good, it seems I'll have to step in and give you some additional incentives. I don't want to, but you leave me no choice."

"I understand."

"I don't think you do. Let me be very blunt: get control of yourself, Iason. Keep your cock in your pants and stop fucking your pet. Good afternoon."

Still holding the phone, Lord Mink sat down, frowning. Their conversation had left him feeling even more miserable. He hated being reprimanded by the Headmaster. Even after all these years, he was still deeply affected by the Blondie's opinion of him. His obvious disappointment and shock over his relationship with Riki was hard to take, especially now, when he was already so upset, not that he was at all surprised by Konami's reaction. He had expected as much, but for it to come the very day Riki had run away, was almost more than he could bear.

He didn't care what the Headmaster did to him, however—he had no intention of changing anything now, when it came to the mongrel. He had grown accustomed to having him in his bed and couldn't even imagine anything different. And he was certainly *not* interested in acquiring a new pet. He wanted Riki, and Riki alone.

He *had* to find him.

Next he phoned Katze, who answered immediately.

"Katze speaking."

"He's run away."

"You're sure?"

"He just bought a 6500 Supernova at Goda's Post, not far from the hospital, and then some additional items at Cornucopia."

"Shit."

Now Iason sighed. "Where do you think he'd go, Katze? Back to Ceres?"

"Possibly, although it's doubtful after what happened with Bison. He'd be smart to stay clear of there."

"He won't find Tanagura too welcoming, either."

"Maybe somewhere else in Midas? Or even...Urus?"

"Do you really think he'd go that far?"

"I don't know. But you also might want to think about alerting the

spaceport. I don't think he would leave Amoi, but you never know."

Horried at this thought, Iason quickly ended the call and contacted the port to ensure that if his pet arrived there, he would be promptly detained. He was relieved to learn that, thus far, Riki's identification hadn't shown up on any security retinal scans for the spaceport or for any outgoing vessels. The Head of Port Security assured him that the mongrel wouldn't be able to leave Amoi, now that his profile had been flagged.

Iason then paced the penthouse, his emotions oscillating wildly between worry and anger as he contemplated his pet's actions. He comforted himself with the knowledge that the mongrel would eventually be found. One thing he knew for sure: Riki would most certainly be punished. The Blondie found some distraction entertaining how that would be accomplished; his pet would feel the full force of his wrath, no question. He would neither spare his arm nor his tongue, and before he was finished with him, Riki would sorely regret this latest, most egregious act of disobedience.

Though he tried to keep his mind on Riki's punishment, he found his thoughts shifting instead to his worries and fears for him. He felt certain he was somewhere unfamiliar, alone and cold. And although he knew the street-smart mongrel could take care of himself, he was nevertheless worried about his safety, especially as he had recently made a few enemies in Ceres.

He could not help but recall how he had first met Riki. This time, should something similar happen, Iason wouldn't be there to save him.

2

Dana Burn

LORD SAMI HAD FALLEN ASLEEP. Juthian used the opportunity to examine him, marveling over the Blondie's flawless physique. He had always been enamored of it, especially his chest and shoulders, and his muscular, powerful arms. But now his gaze moved lower, to the place that frightened—and intrigued—him most.

In his flaccid state, Xian was far less intimidating, yet his immense size was still evident. Juthian marveled over him, feeling ashamed for having made such a fuss when his Master had attempted to penetrate him. Even so, he was still undeniably nervous over what was to come.

As he was studying the Blondie's organ, it suddenly moved. He gasped, and then watched, fascinated, as it quickly began to thicken, lengthening and hardening as it twitched and grew. He knew then that his Master was awake, but he continued to stare at his erection, afraid to look him in the eye.

"Do you like what you see, Juthian?" Xian asked softly.

"Yes, Master. I enjoy watching you." Juthian had performed for him on countless occasions, and now he almost felt as though the Blondie was performing for *him*.

Lord Sami began to play with Juthian's hair. The attendant's soft tresses, as always, invited his touch. His heart began beating faster: soon he would be inside his Ju for the first time. He desperately hoped Juthian would be more cooperative this time, for he didn't want to take him by force, yet he was so anxious to possess him he could hardly bear it.

"Touch me," he commanded.

With tentative fingers, the attendant began to fondle him, though he felt a little hesitant to be encouraging his Master's arousal, knowing what was inevitably coming.

"Like this," Xian whispered, taking hold of his hand to demonstrate how he wanted to be handled. "You're trembling," he remarked, after a pause.

Juthian now braved a look at him, his eyes betraying his fear.

"Why are you so frightened of me, Ju? This isn't your first time. I've watched you copulate with several pets."

"Pets aren't the same. They're small, not like you."

Lord Sami sat up a bit, leaning back on his elbows. He was now fully erect and anxious to proceed. "I'll go slowly," he promised. "Now, come here."

He held out his hand to Juthian and pulled him against his own body. Then he began exploring him. Excited, Xian slid his hands down to his ass and spread him open, squeezing his buttocks apart with eager fingers.

"Oh, Ju," he moaned. "I'm so ready for you."

Juthian shivered as his Master began kissing his neck. "That feels nice," he gasped.

"Does it?" Xian rolled him over onto his back and ran his hand down the length of his slender body.

Desperately wishing he was still physically capable of truly appreciating the Blondie's touch, Juthian closed his eyes, trying to imagine what it would feel like if he were still sexually intact. Although he loved his Master's touch and his kisses, they simply didn't have the same effect on him as they would have otherwise, and he found himself admittedly envious of the Blondie's pleasure.

"What is it, Ju?"

Juthian shook his head.

"Do you not enjoy being with me?"

"It's not that. Of course I'm enjoying it. I only wish...."

"Yes? What is it you wish?" Lord Sami flicked the boy's nipple with his finger, a seductive, half-smile at his lips.

"I wish that I was still equipped so that I could perform, especially right now."

Xian grew serious, nodding. "It should have been that way. I was...hasty, Ju. If I had it to do again, I would *not* have had you modified."

This confession was enough for Juthian; he knew how difficult it was for his Master to admit his own errors. Smiling, he took the Blondie's hand and began erotically sucking on his fingers.

"Yes, my pretty boy," Lord Sami whispered. "That's very good."

After a few minutes of this, Xian pulled his hand away, dipping his fingers into the bowl of oil that was on a shelf next to the bed. "Spread your legs for me, Ju."

Juthian obeyed, and for some minutes the Blondie began preparing him with his fingers, trying his best to remain patient. Once the youth had relaxed somewhat, however, he could wait no longer.

"It's time, Juthian," he announced. "Will you be brave for me this time?"

Hesitating only for a moment, Juthian nodded, feeling his mouth grow dry even as his heart began tapping out a more anxious beat.

"Get on your hands and knees, then."

"Yes, Master."

Lord Sami got into position behind him, putting his hands firmly on his hips as he slid his cock teasingly between his legs, rubbing up against his perineum.

"Oh, Ju."

Although he longed to sink into his now quite vulnerably positioned former pet, the Blondie forced himself to spend a few more minutes preparing him again, suspecting, quite correctly, that he had tensed up as the critical moment drew near.

"I've been waiting for this, for a very long time," he remarked.

Juthian smiled, pleased with this confession. "How long, Master?"

"Since the day you first came to me. I fear I made you perform more than you might have liked."

"I didn't mind. I enjoyed it, Master."

Spreading his ass cheeks apart, Lord Sami arched up against him so that his cock just brushed against his sphincter. He pressed his lips together tightly and struggled to rein in an almost overpowering desire to simply take him without restraint. "Try to stay relaxed, Ju."

This will hurt a little.” With that, the Blondie penetrated firmly, but only partially, so that the tip of his cock was just inside him.

Juthian cried out, panicking. “It hurts too much! Please stop!”

Xian, who had absolutely no intention of letting him back out again, answered this by gripping him even more firmly and forcing him to stay in position. “Shhh,” he soothed. “Just relax.”

“I *can’t* relax!”

The Blondie waited as patiently as he could, closing his eyes and clenching his teeth, until Juthian’s complaints finally subsided. Then, he advanced a little deeper, once again eliciting a loud cry of protest.

“*Stop!*”

“Hush,” Lord Sami scolded. “What a fuss! And you said you would be brave for me!”

“But...it feels *dreadful*.”

From the Blondie’s perspective, it felt quite the opposite. The boy was clamped hard on his cock, and it took all of his resolve not to simply sink into that glorious resistance.

“Ju,” he warned, “you’re getting a good, hard fucking no matter what you do. But if you continue in this vein, you’ll get it sooner rather than later, for I won’t be inclined to be as patient with you as I’ve been up until now.” He illustrated his point with some gentle hip movements that abruptly ended with a forceful, painful thrust.

Ju howled but, understanding his Master’s threat, finally remained obediently positioned.

“That’s it. Submit to me.”

“*Oh! Ohhhh!*”

The Blondie advanced further, inching in slowly but progressively. “Good boy! Now you’re pleasing me, Ju. Put your head down on the bed.”

Juthian obeyed, spreading his knees a little wider apart.

“That’s the way! Yes, Ju, yes! Oh, I’m enjoying this so much! This is pure heaven! What an ass you have, Ju! Sexy, *sexy* boy!”

“You’re so big,” Ju whimpered.

“We’re almost there now!”

“I can’t take much more, Master!”

“Shhhhh. You’re doing wonderfully! Arch your back for me, yes, just

like that! Ah, you feel *glorious*! I can't wait any longer—here we go, Ju!"

"*Oh, Master!*" Juthian gasped, clutching the bedspread.

"Yes, my pet. I'm completely inside you now," Xian whispered, delighted to have finally accomplished this objective. "I've wanted to do this for such a very long time. *Ahhh!* Jupiter be damned; this is paradise!"

Juthian quieted, pleased that his Master had addressed him, once again, as his *pet*, though also admittedly shocked at hearing him refer to Jupiter so disrespectfully.

Though no stranger to the coital arts, Juthian had never experienced anything so intense in all his life. He felt full of the Blondie, almost to the point of bursting. As the initial pain began to subside, however, he began to relish the sensation. He had offered himself and his Master had entered him intimately, even knowing that such congress was forbidden. It was a moment he had long hoped for, and now it had finally come to pass.

Lord Sami then proceeded with nothing less than a full-scale assault, impaling Ju onto his cock forcefully, even violently, over and over. "Magnificent," he breathed, eyes rolling back in ecstasy, "simply magnificent." He rocked his body into the boy without restraint, groaning and gasping all the while.

Juthian relaxed, his body going limp in his Master's hands. He gave himself over to the Blondie, delighting in his exclamations and groans of pleasure.

"Now you're submitting to me properly! I'm giving you a good fucking now, aren't I?"

"Yes, Master!"

"Yet you're still gripping me perfectly! Such marvelous resistance, I can barely squeeze inside you! Oh, Ju, I'm going to fill you up with my cum, I can't hold back any longer!"

With that, the great Blondie climaxed inside Juthian for the first time, ejaculating with great force as copious amounts of his essence exploded from him.

Xian felt as though he were transported to some other realm. He opened his mouth, but at first was rendered completely silent. Then



◡ Lord Sami with Juthian ◡
Art by Feiseye

he unleashed a deep, throaty groan as though he were in agony. Ju listened, shivering at the sound and desperately wishing he could see his Master's face.

As his senses slowly returned to him, the Blondie withdrew, and then lay down on the bed. "My pet," he whispered, pulling Juthian up against his body. "That was just as I hoped."

"I'm sorry I was so difficult in the beginning."

"No apologies, Ju. You were very good. I rushed you, I know. In fact, I should be apologizing for taking you before you were ready. But I found I couldn't help myself, once I was inside you. I wish you could have felt the same pleasure that I did."

Juthian wished for that as well, but remained silent on that point. He was just about to ask his Master if he had heard of G-wave devices when there came a sudden pounding at the front door.

"Bloody hell, who in the world could that be?"

Xian's cursing elicited a giggle from the attendant, who found it extraordinarily funny to hear his Master, a refined Blondie, swearing like a mongrel.

"Stay here," Lord Sami commanded, rising and donning a pair of silky pajama bottoms. He made his way to the door, angry in advance at whoever had interrupted them. It was no doubt some nosy neighbor coming to see what they were up to. He half expected it to be Megala Chi, wanting to borrow a cup of sugar or some other ridiculous thing. But when he opened the door, he was surprised to see Yousi Xuuju standing there, shivering from the cold.

"Yousi? What are you doing here?"

Lord Xuuju stared back at him, silent.

"What is it? Here...come inside! It's freezing out there." Xian opened the door wide, encouraging the Blondie to enter.

Yousi stepped inside, looking around with an inexplicable expression on his face. "I don't know why I came here."

"Are you ill, old friend? You don't look well." Lord Sami was genuinely concerned, having never seen him behave so strangely.

Yousi looked as though he might speak: he opened his mouth but then closed it again, frowning.

"Would you like a drink? Or some tea, perhaps, to warm you up?"

Lord Sami offered.

The Blondie stared back at him as if not really hearing or understanding the question, but he followed when Xian led him, by the elbow, to a chair by the fire.

“Juthian!” Xian called out loudly.

Juthian emerged from the bedroom a few moments later, his tunic on backwards. “Yes, Master?”

“Please make Lord Xuuju some tea.”

Juthian continued to stand, staring at Yousi and wondering what was wrong with him.

“Did you hear me, Ju?” the Blondie snapped.

“Oh! Yes, Master, right away!”

As Juthian rushed off into the kitchen, Lord Sami crouched down next to his old friend, who was now looking around the room, his brow furrowed together as if deeply confused by something.

“Shall I call your attendant for you?”

Yousi looked directly at him, his eyes dark and intense. “This...is my villa,” he said, finally.

Xian returned his gaze, feeling astonished. In fact, it *had* once been Yousi’s villa, before Jupiter had stripped him of his assets. But did the Blondie really remember any of that?

“That’s right. The villa once belonged to you, Yousi. But I bought it after...after—”

“After Jupiter modified me,” Yousi finished.

Surprised that Lord Xuuju was even aware of what had happened to him, Xian fell silent.

“Now it is your villa,” Yousi concluded, sadly.

“Well now...there are plenty of villas on the lake. I can buy another one, if you want this one back, Yousi.”

“You would sell it back to me?” the Blondie’s eyes shone with tears.

Lord Sami smiled. “Better than that, I’ll *give* it to you, old friend. Would that make you happy?”

“Yes,” Yousi nodded, staring down at his hands. “I think it would help me.”

Xian studied him for a long moment. Something about Yousi was decidedly different. It almost seemed as if he were less impaired. And

it was apparent he had retrieved at least part of his memory. He puzzled over this, as neurological modifications were supposed to be permanent. He put his hand on the Blondie's knee in a comforting way.

Lord Xuuju put his gloved hand on top of his, looking once again into his eyes. "We were friends, you and I," he whispered.

"Yes," Lord Sami replied, his heart beating a little faster. "We were good friends. You had many friends, Yousi."

"Omaki...he was my best friend."

"That's right. And he's still your friend. We're all still your friends, Yousi."

"He comes to see me every week, and he...takes care of things."

Xian nodded. He knew that Omaki had taken a personal interest in helping the Blondie recover financially from the confiscation of his assets and had actually given him the pavilion Bondage Shop, which had allowed Yousi to accumulate a tremendous amount of new wealth.

"I want to see him," Yousi announced. "Can I see him, please?"

"Of course. I'll call him, right away."

"Your tea, Sir Yousi," Juthian said, bringing him a cup of tea and some almond biscuits.

Yousi smiled, taking the proffered cup and dipping a cookie into it. "I like tea," he replied. "I always liked tea."

"That's right. You always did like tea. Now, just sit back and enjoy it, and I'll call Omaki."

"I always liked biscuits, too."

Lord Sami retired to his bedroom where he could talk privately, his hands trembling as he made the call.

"Omaki Ghan." Only two words, but the Blondie said them in such a way as to sound deliberately seductive.

"It's Xian Sami. Omi: guess who has come to see me?"

Lord Ghan paused for a moment. "I haven't the slightest notion. But I must say, I believe this is the first time you've called me in ten years. And not even a 'how are you?'"

"Yes, yes. Forgive me. Listen—it's Yousi. He came over here and seems rather confused. He actually remembers that this used to be his

villa.”

“Is he all right?” Omaki asked, immediately alarmed.

“Honestly, he does seem upset. And he’s asking for you: he wants to see you.”

“You’re at the villa?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you,” Lord Sami replied, breathing a little easier. In truth, he felt entirely at a loss dealing with Yousi, but Omaki, more than anyone he knew, always had a special way with him. “Omi, there’s one more thing I should tell you.”

“Yes?”

“He’s remembering things.”

“Oh? You mean besides the villa?”

“Yes, he knows that Jupiter modified him in some way. And he remembers that we were all friends. He spoke especially of you.”

Lord Ghan fell silent for a moment, puzzling over this information. “He remembers that?”

“Yes. In fact, he seems different. You’ll see what I mean when you get here.”

“Then, I’m on my way.”

Lord Sami returned to the great hall to find Juthian sitting at Yousi’s feet, his tunic still on backwards, listening with rapt attention as the Blondie described how the room had changed since he had occupied it.

“There was a hutch, over there, with blue dishes. They were blue with a white design, like new snow falling on a lake. And...this tea set. I had one like it, only mine had silver trim. I remember the silver because I was the only one who had it. Everyone else had gold trim, but mine was silver. Silver, not gold. Aristian silver.”

Juthian turned to look at his Master as he approached them, his eyes wide. He knew something was different with Yousi, as well, having spoken to him at the pavilion on many occasions.

“They were silver,” the Blondie repeated thoughtfully.

“Omaki’s coming to see you, Yousi. He’ll be here soon.”

Lord Xuuju smiled at this, helping himself to another biscuit. He

then fell into a silent reverie, seeming suddenly rather tired.

Although Xian was anxious to get Juthian back into his bed for another round of sex, he found that he was genuinely moved by Yousi's visit—or more precisely, by his altered manner. He sat with the Blondie, studying him, wondering about the change in his old friend, wondering, too, if it were possible that the Yousi he once knew might still be there, somewhere—not dead, but only sleeping, and now, by some miracle, awakening once again.



“NO LUCK,” KATZE REPORTED, AFTER THE DAY’S SEARCH for Riki failed to produce any solid leads as to his whereabouts. It was near dusk, and all of them knew it would be even harder to find the mongrel after dark.

Lord Mink sighed. “Very well, then. I’ll issue a full-scale alert and put a reward out.”

“What do you want us to do?”

“Keep searching for a few more hours. But I’ll leave it up to you where to look.” Iason then rather abruptly terminated the call.

Katze closed his phone, frowning.

“What did he say?” Odi asked.

“He’s putting out an alert.”

“Good. That’s probably the only way we can find him.”

“He wants us to keep searching, though. I think I should go to Ceres. It’s not likely Riki went back there after what happened with Bison, but you never know. That’s the place he knows best. But I need my roadhugger.”

“We can drop you off back at the Tower,” Askel offered. “Freyn and I will keep searching Tanagura.”

Odi gave a short nod. “Tai and I will go to Midas. We’ll start in Apatia.”

Freyn shook his head, puzzled. “Did he say why Riki wasn’t wearing his pet ring?”

“No. I think he took it off when Riki went back to Midas. He must have never put it back on again,” Katze answered.

“And now Iason is at the penthouse with no security whatsoever,” Odi remarked, looking troubled. “How do we know this isn’t all some ploy to get him alone?”

“I see your point, but I actually agree with Iason: Riki has simply run away,” Katze asserted. “He bought a bike, plus things he would need if he were planning on hiding out somewhere. I don’t see how you could interpret it any other way. And really, it’s not all that surprising. I’ve taken him for granted, but Riki was never one who you’d imagine being a Blondie’s pet. He’s come a long way in two years, but he has still not adjusted to losing his freedom. I think maybe coming back to Iason’s rules and restrictions after having a week to do just as he pleased in Midas—it was simply too much for him.”

The others nodded in agreement.

At that moment, a siren could be heard on the streets, and the information posts on every corner lit up with an alert. A holographic projection of Riki rotated slowly in front of each post as a voice repeated the details of the alert: “Alert! Runaway pet, ID Z107M, Riki, mongrel male. Property of Iason Mink. Also known as Riki the Dark. May be riding a 6500 Supernova. Last seen wearing dark pants and a black leather jacket. Pet is wearing a gold collar with the initials I.M. Reward for his safe return is set at fifty million credits.”

“Fifty million credits!” Askel cried.

“Holy shit,” Katze breathed, his eyes widening in disbelief.

“That should get him back,” Odi commented. “Iason is smart.”

“And bloody wealthy,” Freyn added.

Already citizens were standing around the alerts, visibly excited. The sirens had shut off and would only come on periodically, but the flashing light continued to spin and the information remained posted in holographic script, an audible version of the alert repeating every fifteen minutes.

“He must really adore his pet,” Tai remarked thoughtfully, “to give up that much for his safe return.”

“He does,” Katze agreed, “which is why it was so stupid of me to let Riki out of my sight. If anything happens to him, I’m in deep shit.”

“Then, let’s get moving,” Odi said anxiously.



KEI HAD JUST FINISHED WITH A DELIVERY in Mistral Park when he heard the alert sirens. He brought his vehicle to a halt in front of one of the information centers, staring at Riki's image in disbelief as he listened to the alert.

"What do we have here?" he murmured, a smile curling at his lips. So. Riki had run away from his Master, and it sounded as though the great Blondie wanted him back.

Kei was furious with Riki for what he had done to Guy and the rest of Bison and had been stewing over how he could get back at him.

Now, he finally saw his opportunity for revenge. And...fifty million credits? He would be set for life. Of course, he would give Riki a good working over before he returned him to his Master. He would get the reward *and* his payback.

It was all too perfect.

Grinning, he sped off, trying to guess where the mongrel was hiding. Now that an alert had been issued, he knew Riki would have to stay put, wherever he was. The question was: where had he gone?

He felt certain Riki wouldn't dare return to Ceres. He had most likely been in a big hurry to get out of Tanagura. Although it was possible he was hiding out in Midas proper, somehow Kei suspected he would try to get as far away from his Master as possible. If he hadn't already left the planet, his best guess was that the mongrel had made for Urus.

He got on the Midas freeway, heading toward Urus, and was just about to move into airspace when he passed the closed road that led to Dana Burn. He practically skidded to a halt. Of course! It would be the perfect hideout! No one would think to look there: the place was said to be cursed and haunted.

Not that Kei believed such foolishness, however. No, death was permanent. There was no coming back from the grave. Therefore, there was nothing to fear. As for whether or not Dana Burn was cursed, well, if the mongrel was hiding out there, it might be cursed for *him*. For Kei, however, it would be a different story.

“Fifty million credits,” he whispered, grinning.

Smiling, he made a U-turn and took the old road to the ruins, just as the sun began to set. By the time Dana Burn was in sight, it was dark, and snowing furiously.

Parking his vehicle a stone’s throw away from the structure, he crept toward it, shivering, and not just from the cold. The old ruins were creepy, that much was true enough. He could understand now why everyone was so afraid of the place. The wind had picked up, howling eerily around him.

Turn, turn, turn

Death awaits at Dana Burn

The old children’s rhyme popped into his head, and for a brief moment, Kei hesitated.

But then he saw the bike parked outside the entrance. Grinning, he moved closer and made the identification: sure enough, it was a 6500 Supernova, obviously brand new.

“I’ve got you now, bastard,” he whispered.

Flipping open his laser-knife, he crept toward the dark entrance, peering inside. It was pitch black, but for a greenish-blue light coming from somewhere within. He could hear a strange buzzing sound. Was it a radio? Slowly, quietly, he crept toward the light. Coming to an open door, he peered into the room.

Riki was sitting on a cot, smoking, and fiddling with a radio that seemed to find nothing but static.

“Hello, Riki,” he said softly.

Startled, the mongrel jumped to his feet and dropped his smoke.

Kei laughed. “You were so fucking easy to find. You’ve got no imagination, *pet*. And now, thanks to your stupidity, I’ve just earned myself a bloody fortune.”

“Fuck you,” Riki spat.

“No, you’re the one who’s fucked. After I’m finished with you, you’ll wish you’d never been born. I might even have to cut up that pretty face of yours.” Kei began walking toward him, holding his knife in a menacing manner.

“Stop right there, you fucking bastard,” the mongrel commanded, pointing his laser gun at him.

Laughing, Kei lunged for him, completely surprised when Riki actually fired. The laser went straight through the center of his chest, exiting out his back.

Kei dropped to his knees, stunned.

Riki stared at him, horrified. "I told you to stop."

The young man fell to the floor, on his side. The pain was unimaginable. He gazed up at the mongrel, frightened. "Help me."

Riki knelt down next to him, tears filling his eyes. "Shit," he murmured, pressing his hands on Kei's chest in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding. Suddenly, his rival looked like a mere boy, his eyes wide and his mouth trembling.

"Hold...hold my hand," Kei begged, fully aware that he was about to die, and very much afraid. His vendetta against the mongrel now forgotten, he only wanted someone to be with him as the darkness of his final moment overcame him.

Riki held his hand as requested, his fingers still covered with Kei's blood.

"*Turn, turn,*" Kei whispered weakly.

"What?" the mongrel shook his head, leaning closer. *What was Kei trying to say?*

The young man was in too much pain to say anything more. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

For a long moment the two mongrels gazed at each another. Then, as Riki watched in utter horror, the light in Kei's eyes simply faded away, and the life slipped from his body.

Kei was dead.

3

A Master's Obligation

YOUSI LOOKED UP AT LORD GHAN'S APPROACH, smiling when he saw the familiar face. "Omaki."

"How are you, old friend? I heard you wanted to see me?"

"This is my villa," Yousi announced.

"Well now...it's true that *once* this was your villa. But now it belongs to Xian."

Lord Sami shook his head. "Actually, I gave it back to him."

Omaki studied the Blondie for a moment, genuinely surprised. "You *gave* it to him?"

"Yes. He seemed...upset."

"It's my villa," Yousi repeated.

"Yes, Yousi, it appears so—this *is* your villa, once again. That was very nice of Xian, wasn't it, to give it back to you like that?"

Yousi nodded. "We're all still friends."

Now Omaki took in Lord Sami's half-dressed state and Juthian's comical attire. He smiled knowingly, giving the Blondie a wink. "Then, perhaps we ought to let Xian have his last night here in the villa. Why don't you come and stay with me tonight?"

"All right," Yousi replied agreeably.

Lord Ghan turned to Xian. "Let me pay you for the villa."

"No, no. It's the least I can do. You've already done so much for him."

"I insist."

Lord Sami shook his head. "No."

"How about half, then? Let me pay you for half its value. We'll think of it as...a partnership, towards helping an old friend. Please. If I had known he even remembered having a villa or that he wanted one, I would have taken care of it. Please, Xian."

Pausing for a moment, the Blondie finally nodded. "Very well."

"Come, Yousi. I daresay you've had enough biscuits and tea. You'll eat all his cookies and then what will poor Xian have with his tea? Let's go now, and give him some privacy."

"I had eleven biscuits," Yousi said proudly, "and two cups of tea. But these ones don't have silver trim." He held up a teacup, examining it again.

"I'll bring him back tomorrow to pick up his vehicle," Omaki added. "Are you planning to purchase another villa?"

"Most likely. I was thinking of something a little more...isolated."

Lord Ghan glanced at Juthian and nodded. "Yes. I must say, my arrival here seemed to have generated a good deal of interest at Megala's villa. I could actually see the curtains moving."

Xian rolled his eyes. "Yes, of all my neighbors, Megala is the nosiest. In fact, I'm rather surprised he hasn't dreamt up some excuse to come over here. Last time I stayed here, he kept coming over to borrow sugar. I finally asked him what it was for and he claimed he was making a cake."

Both Blondies laughed at this.

"Making a cake!" Yousi repeated, smiling in an endearing, though obviously clueless, manner.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Yousi? Why don't I have Ru make you a cake tonight?"

"How many pieces can I have?" the Blondie asked, looking concerned.

"You may have as much as you like. Though if you eat more than two pieces, your tummy will hurt."

"What kind of cake will it be?"

"What kind would you like?"

"I don't know."

"Well...if I recall, your favorite cake is—"

"Aristian Chocolate!" Yousi yelled, standing up suddenly. His

teacup and saucer went crashing to the floor. “My favorite cake is Aristian Chocolate!”

Juthian rushed to clean up the mess as Omaki tried to calm the Blondie down. “Yes...that’s right: Aristian Chocolate.”

“I just remembered!”

Xian and Omaki exchanged a look.

“All right. Maybe two cups of tea is a little too much,” Lord Ghan said gently. “Come, Yousi, let’s go now, shall we?”

Yousi nodded, once again looking completely drained.

“Thank you, Omi,” Xian whispered.

Omaki smiled, glancing over at Juthian before giving him another wink. “Have fun tonight.”

Lord Sami, surprised that the Blondie had already guessed their intentions, had no reply to this, but nodded ever so slightly.

As the Blondies began heading toward the door, Yousi suddenly stopped and turned back around.

“Thank you for your kindness, Xian,” he said.

In that moment, in the way the Blondie spoke these words and in the unexpected glimmer of intelligence in his usually vacant eyes, it almost seemed as if the old Yousi had returned.



FOR A LONG TIME, RIKI SIMPLY SAT near Kei’s body, staring at him. Finally he decided he had to do something. There was no way he was spending the night alone with a corpse—especially not at Dana Burn. He wiped his hands off on Kei’s jacket, and then checked his pockets for anything useful. He found an Independent channel handheld and put that aside; he also took Kei’s knife.

Around his neck he discovered a pendant charm on a chain. When he turned it over, he saw that it read, *Love, Guy*. He removed this and shoved it into his pocket, feeling ill as he contemplated how Guy would react when he learned that Kei was dead. His anger at his former pairing partner was now completely dissipated; he felt sorry for Guy, and horribly guilty about what he had just done, as well.

He left Kei with his paper credits, deciding not to chance the old

superstition that money from a dead man only brought bad luck. Then, he took hold of his body and dragged him outside and down to the ocean.

It had been snowing hard for some time, and Kei's body left a trail of blood in the snow, all the way down to the beach. Riki rolled him into the water, but Kei simply lay there on the sand, the tides washing over him.

"Fuck," he muttered. He picked up the body and carried it deeper into the water until he was satisfied the sea would take him away.

As he emerged from the water, he realized how foolish it had been to get wet. He had no other clothes, and now he was freezing.

Shivering violently, he hurried back to the shelter, immediately undressing and sitting close to the heater to warm himself again. The heater was helpful, but not very powerful, and Riki longed for a *real* fire.

Once he had warmed up a little, he cut up an old wooden chair using the laser-knife, and then carted the pieces out to the shelter entryway, deciding to build a fire just inside the building where smoke could escape. This was accomplished rather quickly, for the wood was very old and dry. Riki retrieved his radio and tried to position it closer to the entrance, suspecting that some sort of shield in the building was blocking the signal.

Sure enough, right away he began receiving transmissions, and his heart almost stopped when he heard his name. He listened to the broadcasted alert in disbelief, his eyes widening when he heard the reward Iason was offering for his return. *Fifty million credits?* No wonder Kei had come for him!

Suddenly, Riki just wanted to go home. And he knew that home was with Iason, in Eos. He was tired, depressed, and uncomfortable. And he knew it was only a matter of time before he ended up back at the penthouse anyway. With all of Amoi on alert for him, he would be caught as soon as he ventured into one of the cities for more provisions.

He wasn't even completely sure now why he had run, except that he had been having a very bad day and had been too proud to kneel before Jewel. He had put Katze in a terrible bind; the eunuch would

probably never forgive him for it.

Worst of all, he had done the unthinkable. He had actually *killed* someone. Though, admittedly, he had no great love for Kei, now he couldn't get his face out of his mind: his wide eyes, his trembling lips, the way he had begged Riki to hold his hand as he died.

He was also frightened, ashamed as he was to admit it; he kept hearing eerie sounds coming from deep within the old structure that he found especially unnerving, and in the back of his mind he half expected Kei's corpse, dripping with seawater, to come walking back into the shelter, arms outstretched, seeking vengeance for his untimely death.

Though he wanted to go back to Eos, he knew Iason would be furious with him. He was afraid of the punishment that was in store for him, plain and simple.

Perhaps...if he could talk to the Blondie, he could negotiate some sort of punishment-free return. He knew it was highly unlikely Iason would agree, but it was worth a shot.

Retrieving Kei's phone, he sat near the fire, and with a pounding heart entered Iason's direct access code and pressed the *engage* key.

"Iason Mink." The Blondie's voice was strained, the words spoken quickly and sharply.

"It's me."

"Riki!" Lord Mink exclaimed. "Where *are* you?"

"Somewhere safe," the mongrel answered evasively.

"Pet, tell me where you are, this instant!" Iason commanded, sounding absolutely furious.

"Stop yelling at me or I'll hang up."

"I want you home, Riki. *Now*." The Blondie's voice was calmer, but decidedly firm.

"Not so fast. I have a few conditions."

There was a short pause. "What, Riki? What is it you want? The bike? Is that what this is all about?"

Surprised, Riki thought about this for a moment. "Yeah, a bike would be nice. I'd like to keep this one, anyway, *and* be able to ride it, too."

"Very well; I will let you keep the bike, provided you return home

immediately. No: tell me where you are, and I'll come and get you."

"That's not all I want. I also want a promise from you that I won't be punished for running away."

The Blondie sighed loudly, exasperated. "Riki. You know perfectly well you'll be punished. But I can promise you that your punishment will be *much less severe* if you come home now than it will be *if I have to find you and bring you home*."

Iason knew this was not entirely true: Riki was in for serious punishment, no matter what he did. On this point his hands were tied. As the Headmaster had informed him, the minimum punishment for running away was set forth in the General Code: 5 lashes with a whip, or 200 strikes with any other implement. He could only hope that Riki would be intimidated enough by his threat, to suppose coming home voluntarily would gain him an advantage.

The mongrel was silent, considering.

"Riki," Iason continued, his voice finally betraying his emotion, "I've been so worried about you. I...I confess, I don't understand why you did this. Why did you run away?"

"Because I could," Riki answered honestly.

"Are you so unhappy?"

"Why *shouldn't* I be unhappy? You're always disciplining me for one thing or another."

"But Riki, I *only* discipline you because you persist in disobeying me. All you have to do is submit to me and behave, and you'll never be punished again."

"Like this three strikes rule, for instance," Riki continued, ignoring him. "It's absurd that I have to say *Master* this and *Master* that all the time. I can't remember to do it, and then you beat me with that bloody taming stick. And also, this thing where you ration out my smokes makes me feel so...helpless and worthless. I don't want to be completely dependent on you for every little thing. You've got to let me keep my pride."

Lord Mink listened quietly as his pet poured out his heart, explaining all that had been eating away at him. "We can discuss all these issues when you return," he promised. He had been desperately trying to pull up a location on his pet's signal and was frustrated when

he was unable to do so.

"I'm on an Independent channel," Riki said, guessing at what he was up to by the sound of the typing in the background. "You can't trace me."

Iason abruptly stopped typing and closed his eyes, sighing. "Riki, *please*. Tell me where you are."

"Not until you agree to my conditions."

"Pet," the Blondie replied, his anger now creeping into his voice, "you *will* tell me where you are, and you will tell me *now*. Do you hear me?"

The mongrel's gaze drifted past the fire to the area surrounding the old structure, where his attention was captured by the snow reddened from Kei's blood. Suddenly, all he could think about was the look in Kei's eyes as he died, still clutching his hand, and how, afterwards, he had dragged the young man's body down to the sea and dumped him there. He found that he was weeping.

Lord Mink, surprised to hear him crying, immediately softened. "Now, I know you're afraid of being punished. It's true, I'll have to punish you. I can't lie to you about that, but we'll get through this. The best thing you can do for yourself right now, is to tell me exactly where you are, and I'll come get you."

"Good night, Iason."

"Riki! *Don't hang up!*"

"This call has been terminated by the initiating party," came the automatic, robotic message. "Please disconnect your frequency to keep this channel open for others to use. Thank you for using Independent: a public service brought to you by the Coalition for a Free Amoi."

Shaking, Lord Mink closed his handheld communicator, staring at it for a few moments. Once again, he felt a burning in his eyes, as tears of worry and love welled up there, clouding his vision. He sat alone in the dark for some time, puzzling over his pet's words, and as he did so, he felt another severe headache coming on.

This time, he welcomed it, remembering how he had been able to find Riki at the Taming Tower during just such a headache. He closed his eyes, concentrating all his thoughts—no, his entire being—on the

mongrel. Then he was able to rise above the pain, remaining focused on his purpose, and when an image began to form in his mind, he honed in, hovering there as long as he could.

His pet was afraid; he sat huddled close to a blue light, startling at the slightest noise. And...he was naked. He was in a dark room, lit only by low lights along ancient walls. Iason moved in closer, penetrating Riki's mind as he searched for the answer. And then, clear as the day, the place name came to him: *Dana Burn*.

Opening his eyes, the Blondie ignored his still pounding headache and immediately left the penthouse, making for the old ruins at Dana Burn.



RIKI HAD FINALLY DOZED OFF INTO A FITFUL sleep when he was startled by a sudden noise. He jumped to his feet, not quite believing his eyes.

"Iason!" he gasped.

It was true: unbelievably, impossibly, the Blondie had managed to find him and was now standing in the doorway, arms crossed on his chest.

"*Master* Iason, to you," Lord Mink replied darkly. "Get dressed, we're going."

"But...how did you find me?"

"Why in the world did you take off your clothes?" the Blondie demanded, ignoring his question.

"They were wet," Riki answered softly, tugging on his pants as quickly as he could. His clothes were still damp, but he opted not to say anything about it.

"How did they get wet?"

"I fell...in the snow."

Iason said nothing, but simply stood there, watching as he dressed, which made Riki exceptionally uneasy. He expected, at the very least, a tongue-lashing, but the Blondie's silence was almost worse.

"You're going to punish me, I suppose," he said meekly.

"Oh, you can count on that."

Riki waited for him to say more on the subject, but Lord Mink was apparently disinclined to elaborate. He shrugged on his shirt, shivering from the damp fabric. "What are you going to do to me?"

"You will find out soon enough."

"Can't we just get it over with now?" the mongrel pleaded, guessing that the longer Iason stewed over his transgression, the worse it would be for him.

"*You* will not define the parameters of your punishment, pet," Lord Mink replied, lifting his chin and looking down at him through narrowed eyes. "You will be punished precisely when I am ready to punish you and not a moment before, although I can't imagine why you would be in a hurry for what I have in store for you. I told you it would be much worse for you if I had to come fetch you, didn't I?"

Riki made no answer, glumly tugging on his boots. He watched as the Blondie retrieved his laser gun, as well as Kei's knife and handheld, pocketing them all without a second glance.

Iason noticed the old books on the floor and couldn't resist examining them. One of them was a small journal. It was very old, no doubt dating from the Revolution. He put it in his pocket, deciding it might prove interesting to read.

"What about these?" The mongrel motioned to the lantern and the heater. "I bought a radio, too."

"Leave them. Come; let's go."

Guiding him by the elbow, the Blondie led him out to the vehicle. More snow had fallen. Everything seemed strangely hushed but for the sound of their boots crunching on the snow and the distant surf of the brooding ocean.

As they passed by his new hoverbike, Riki gazed longingly at it, slowing his pace.

Lord Mink saw the look on his face and stopped. "You still want the bike, I suppose."

"You'd never let me ride it."

"No, I wouldn't," the Blondie agreed.

"Then, what would be the point?"

"Do you want it or not?"

The mongrel looked at the hoverbike again. Though there was no

chance of his riding it any time in the immediate future, perhaps one day Iason might relent and let him take it out once in awhile. "Seems a shame to just leave it here," he said finally.

"Very well. I know I shouldn't, but I'll let you keep the bike, Riki. Get in the car, and I'll put it in the trunk."

By this time, enough snow had fallen so that Kei's blood was no longer visible. The Blondie thus had no clue as to the drama that had unfolded there at Dana Burn but a few hours before, nor did he notice the vehicle parked some distance away, for his attention was entirely focused on Riki.

Now that he knew his pet was safe, Lord Mink's anxiety was replaced almost entirely by anger, an anger that masked a deeper, bewildered hurt. Once he was back inside the vehicle, he removed his glove and retrieved Riki's pet ring from his pocket, holding it up between two fingers. "This is never coming off again," he warned. "Unzip your pants."

Sighing, Riki reluctantly obeyed, hanging his head as Iason slipped the ring back onto his cock. He felt the ring constrict slightly at the base of his shaft and he grimaced at its all too familiar discomfort. He knew that he had no choice but to wear it and that, as the Blondie had promised, he would never again be without the hated ring. The thought was troubling—depressing, even—but there was nothing he could do about it.

"I trusted you, Riki. And you betrayed that trust. I'm very disappointed in you."

Before they left Dana Burn, Riki took a final look at the old shelter, remembering, for some odd reason, the word that had finally unlocked the entrance to the structure.

Freedom.

His decision to run away would have consequences: the forthcoming punishment would be just the beginning of it. He knew, without a doubt, that he was about to see his personal freedom markedly curtailed, and he was not looking forward to it.

Lord Mink shot him another dark look as he pulled away from the shelter, his lips pressed together in a tight, thin line. "So *this* is how you repay me, after I gave you an entire week to stretch your legs?"

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apology," Iason snapped. "Have you any idea how much you humiliated me today? I'll never live it down. You've made me the laughingstock of Tanagura."

"I wasn't trying to embarrass you."

"Be that as it may, you certainly did. All of Amoi knows you ran away."

"You didn't have to put out an alert," the mongrel argued.

"Of *course* I had to put out an alert! What did you expect me to do? You couldn't have picked a worse time for this, Riki. I have the Trade Convention to prepare for, not to mention Commander Khosi's visit and the Guardianship Party, but instead I wasted the entire day searching for you."

"I would have come back eventually," Riki whispered.

"And I am supposed to believe this?" Lord Mink retorted. "From the looks of things you were prepared to camp out for quite awhile. I know everything you purchased, pet. I also know about your behavior at Cornucopia and what you said to those females."

"I'm sure you do," the mongrel sighed, letting his head rest back against the vehicle seat.

"Don't you take that tone with me. You're in deep enough trouble as it is, Riki."

"This is punishment enough, having to endure your tongue-lashing," the mongrel groaned.

Iason laughed. "You're complaining already? I've barely started. Make no mistake, you'll hear everything I have to say, as many times as I choose to say it, and this is all a mere prelude to your *real* punishment."

"And you wonder why I ran away."

The Blondie was quiet for a moment. "Why must you be so obstinate?" he sighed finally. "You are scolded and punished *only* because you continue to disobey me. If you would simply submit to me, we would never have these sorts of conversations. How many times must I tell you this? You could have a very comfortable existence, Riki, but *you choose* to make things difficult for yourself. Why must you continue to resist me?"

"I resist you," Riki answered irritably, "because it's fucking absurd for me to be your *pet*. I wasn't raised in the Academy, you know. I had a life before I met you, and it was a good life, too. Ask anyone—in Ceres I was someone."

"How could you possibly prefer life as a slum rat over what I can give you, and *have* given you?"

"You'll never understand. What I had was *freedom*. You took that away from me. There's nothing you can possibly give me that would compensate for that. You don't understand, because you take *your* freedom for granted."

Lord Mink laughed hollowly at this. "*My* freedom? No one is truly free, Riki."

The mongrel wanted to ask what he meant by this, but sensed it wasn't the best time for the question.

Iason glanced at him and then looked away before speaking again. "I suppose you were lying to me, then, when you told me you belonged with me."

"I wasn't lying. I meant it at the time."

"And now?"

"You can hardly expect me to be excited about going home with you, knowing what's coming," Riki answered evasively.

"You know I must punish you," Lord Mink sighed.

"You're *always* punishing me. I'm sick of it."

"Riki, we've just been over this. I punish you only because you continue to be disobedient. Why must you make me repeat myself, over and over?"

"Half the time you punish me for no good reason."

"Jupiter's sake, pet. You exasperate me!"

"Well, it's true."

"It's *not* true," Iason protested. "I always have a good reason for punishing you, and even *you* can't deny I have a *very* good reason, today. In fact, I really ought to get out my whip."

The mongrel swallowed hard at this. "Are you going to?"

"I *should*," the Blondie replied wryly. Privately, of course, he had no intention of ever using a whip on him, even on such a deserving occasion as this. He loved Riki's beautiful, dark skin too much to see

it ruined. He sighed deeply, shaking his head. "I don't understand you, pet. After all this time, I don't understand you at all."

Riki looked out the window, trying to decide what to do. He knew Iason was hurt and confused over his running away, and that he should simply tell him the truth about his confrontation with Jewel. Then, at least, he would understand the real reason why he had run away. It would mean coming clean about Ima. He was going to be punished anyway for running away, why not get everything over with, and be done with it? All he had to do was confess: he had slept with Ima, even though he knew it was forbidden, and even though he knew Iason would be very unhappy to learn about it.

He wanted to say something, yet somehow he simply couldn't bring himself to introduce a topic that was likely to result in even more punishment or make Iason any angrier than he already was.

But it was more than just his anxiety over Iason's probable reaction to his pairing with Ima that kept him silent. Riki felt numb over what had just transpired a few hours before. He had a strange sense of being in the vehicle with Iason, yet somewhere else entirely, at the same time. He felt separate from the world, defiled by what he had done to Kei. He looked down at his hands, almost expecting them to still be covered with blood. Though Riki had never hesitated to fight when the occasion called for it, in all his years as the leader of Bison, he had never *killed* anyone before.

He could still see Kei's frightened expression as his life had slipped away from him. He closed his eyes, fighting back a wave of raw emotion that swept over him. Iason continued to scold him, but now his voice seemed to be coming from far away.

At that moment, an incoming message from Katze momentarily diverted the Blondie, who put the call on speaker. "Call the alert off," he ordered, interrupting the eunuch before he could finish his report. "I've found him."

"That's a relief! Where was he?"

"Dana Burn. Meet me at the penthouse, Katze. I'm on my way there now."

"Yes, Sir," the eunuch replied, after a pause. "May I go to the hospital first, to check on Daryl?"

"You may, but I expect to see you tonight."

The Blondie terminated the call without further comment.

"Fuck. I bet he's pissed as hell at me," the mongrel remarked, adding, after a slight pause, "how did Daryl's surgery go?"

"I wouldn't know. I've been preoccupied with other matters today," Lord Mink replied irritably.

"Please don't punish Katze."

"Katze must face the consequences of his actions, same as you."

"But he didn't do anything! *I'm* the one who ran away!"

The Blondie was firm in his decision. "It was his responsibility to be certain nothing happened to you. He should never have let you out of his sight or released you from your chains."

"I'll take his punishment," the mongrel offered meekly.

Iason only laughed. "You have enough to worry about, my pet."

Riki closed his eyes with a deep sigh. "Fuck. He'll hate me forever now."

They were at the Eos Tower and within minutes back inside the penthouse. Without a word, Iason led him inside by the wrist, gripping him so tightly that the mongrel, at last, had to complain.

"*Ow!* You're cutting off my circulation!"

The Blondie ignored him, pulling him resolutely toward one of the cabinets in the foyer. He opened the cupboard and found the mongrel's old chains, the ones he had used when Riki first came to the penthouse years before.

Riki eyed the chains warily. "Why are you getting those out?"

"That should be obvious. Since you've proven to me you can't be trusted, we'll have to start your training all over again, from the beginning. Get undressed."

"You can't be serious!"

"Do I look like I am joking?" the Blondie snapped.

"No," Riki admitted glumly.

Iason crossed his arms on his chest. "Then obey me. Strip, Riki."

With a loud sigh, the mongrel reluctantly doffed his clothes, frowning as the Blondie manacled his ankles together, then his wrists, and then collared him and attached the neck-ring to the chain.

Next he led him into the great hall to the punishment post in the

corner of the room. The broken clasp on the post had been repaired after Raoul's visit, though admittedly Iason had doubted he would ever have cause to use it again. He realized, as he angrily fastened Riki's chain to the post, that he had been mistaken.

After he ensured that the chains were secure, the Blondie turned and went to his favorite chair in the great hall, where he sat down and made himself comfortable.

The mongrel stood uncertainly. "What are you doing?"

"I am preparing to punish you," Lord Mink answered, crossing his legs languidly.

"You're just sitting there."

"I am contemplating your transgressions and how much you inconvenienced me today, and thinking about how much you are going to regret running away, pet. You gave me quite a headache." In truth, he was still suffering from a headache, though the pain had, thankfully, waned considerably. He wished for a glass of wine and felt annoyed that there was no one at the penthouse to serve him.

Riki looked around him, frowning. "Well, can I at least have a chair or something while you contemplate?"

"You may sit on the floor."

"But that marble is cold!"

"Then, stand!" Iason answered sharply, as he flipped open his handheld and put in a call to Yousi's Bondage & Discipline Shop. "This is Iason Mink," he stated, interrupting the attendant's greeting. "I need a counting stick and a documentor orb delivered to my residence immediately."

"Of course, Lord Mink," the attendant, Quinn, replied. "I assume you want an Academy-approved unit with automatic session submission to Registration?"

"Precisely."

"You've found your pet, then?"

"I have, indeed."

"We're on our way."

The Blondie tossed his phone onto the table by his chair and then stood, making his way over to the bar. Though he had entertained himself imagining how he would punish Riki earlier that day, now

that he had retrieved the mongrel and they were back in the penthouse, he was in no mood to deal with his punishment. It had been a long day, and the fact that he had to administer a serious round of discipline when he was exhausted and feeling poorly was another source of annoyance.

He poured himself a glass of scotch, trying to prepare himself for what he had to do. Deep inside, he was, most of all, simply hurt that Riki had run away. Now he was put in the position of having to answer the mongrel in a way he would never forget, and he knew that Riki would resent him for it.

As a Master, however, Iason had no choice. A runaway pet deserved the harshest punishment he could muster, and he knew this. He would be putting on a performance for all of Amoi, as the session would be recorded and broadcast, so he couldn't go easy on Riki, even if he had wanted to. He had punished Riki too many times to count; this time, however, he would have to do more than just punish him.

He would have to break him.

Within moments Quinn was at the door with the requested items. He showed him the counting stick first. "You enter the number here," he explained, pointing to the panel on one end of the long cane. "The stick will emit a blue glow until the count is finished, then it will change color. You can view the current count on the panel. The number will change provided the impact is sufficient. For the documentor orb, simply press this button, here, to activate it. The orb will levitate and scan your body for tracking purposes, and then ask you a few questions about the session. It has automatic focus and will shift as necessary. When you are finished recording, simply press the button again to deactivate the camera. It will then file the session for you with Registration."

"I see. Very good."

"Any questions?"

"No. You may leave. You have my credit portfolio on file, of course."

"Yes, Sir." The attendant glanced sympathetically at Riki before backing away and leaving the penthouse.

Lord Mink took a long drink of his scotch, draining his glass. He

picked up the counting stick, turning it on one end to find the administration panel. He punched in “200” and then waited. The cane made a quiet humming sound and then began to silently emit a soft blue glow. He slapped the cane against one hand, frowning when the count failed to change. He tried again, this time with more force. The count then read “199”. He reset the count to “200” and then, with the counting stick in one hand and the documentor orb in the other, he walked determinedly and menacingly toward the mongrel.

Riki had opted to sit on the floor after all and now regarded him anxiously.

“Stand up,” Iason commanded.

Wise enough to obey him without much delay, Riki rose to his feet, his chains jangling. “I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

“You know perfectly well. I’m about to punish you, Riki.”

The mongrel’s gaze moved from the counting stick to the orb. “But what is that?”

“This is a documentor orb. I’m afraid, pet, that I’m required by law to deal with you in a certain way. Because you ran away, I’m forced to record your punishment. We’re going to start that session now.”

Riki watched anxiously as the Blondie activated the orb. He’d heard everything the attendant had said about it, though he didn’t quite understand what it was all about. The documentor orb immediately levitated and began scanning Iason.

“Please identify yourself,” the unit stated.

“Iason Mink.”

“What is your pet’s identification number?”

“Z107M.”

“What is reason for this session?”

“My pet is being punished for running away.”

“The minimum sentences to be imposed on a runaway pet are outlined in Section PA667 of the General Code. Do you require a review of that section?”

“I do not.”

“This session will be submitted to Registration to document your compliance with Section PA667 of the General Code. You may proceed.”

Lord Mink removed his outer cape, letting it fall to the floor, and then pushed up the sleeves of his bodysuit. He took a deep breath and turned to face the mongrel. "Pet, you know why you are being punished," he stated loudly. "Today you chose to run away, and now you must accept the consequences of that decision. Turn around and face the wall."

"Iason, I promise you, I'll never run away again," Riki whispered.

"No, you will not, for I will ensure you never again have the opportunity. And now I'm going to make very certain you will never even *contemplate* doing so again. Turn around."

"I *won't* contemplate it," the mongrel agreed.

"I said, turn around!" Iason shouted, pointing to the wall with his cane.

Riki, momentarily surprised and frightened by his sudden anger, remained where he was as though frozen.

Lord Mink helped him into position, flipping him around and forcing his arms up by pinning his wrist chain, with one hand, to the wall above his head.

In all his days with his Blondie Master, Riki had never before known punishment to equal what he then endured at his hand. He was, quite frankly, astonished at Iason's brutality, and at how long he kept him under his arm. Though he made some attempt initially to accept his punishment stoically, in the end his composure was completely shattered. He wept openly and loudly, pleading for an end to the session long before Iason was finished with him.

The mongrel was not the only one in tears. Towards the end of the caning, Iason could barely see. His pet's anguished cries tore at his heart, and he longed to toss the cane aside. When the counting stick shifted from blue to red, he forced himself to continue, though he did so in silence, his own throat too constricted to allow him to speak.

The punishment was severe, no question, but he knew it had to be done, not only for his own reputation, but to ensure that Riki never ran away again. He was shaking with emotion when he finally released the mongrel.

Riki collapsed onto the floor, sobbing uncontrollably.

Breathing hard from the exertion of the session, Iason then

deactivated the documentor orb and the counting stick, putting them aside. He knelt down and attempted to soothe his pet, putting one hand on his shoulder.

“Leave me alone!” the mongrel snarled, recoiling at his touch.

Hurt, Lord Mink withdrew his hand. Deciding to give him some time to cry out his frustration, he rose and, without a word, walked back to the foyer. He stowed the orb and the counting stick in one of the cabinets there and then made for the bar.

His hands still trembled as he poured himself a glass of White Moon. He could hardly bear to listen to Riki’s tormented, pathetic sobbing. He closed his eyes, wondering how long it would take for him to calm down.



THOUGH THE MONGREL WAS NO LONGER SOBBING, he continued to weep quietly for some time.

“I had to be very severe, Riki,” Iason said finally. “You must understand, I had no choice. Your defiance had to be answered in a way you would never forget. But make no mistake, I did not enjoy it.”

The mongrel refused to answer, keeping his head buried on his arms, his knees drawn up to his chest.

His tears ate away at the Blondie, making him wonder if Riki wept, not just because he had been punished, but because he was unhappy to be back in the penthouse again. He brooded over this, wanting to ask, yet finding himself afraid of how the mongrel would answer.

The door chimes sounded, startling him out of his reverie. Irritated, he realized he would have to answer the door himself, as neither the guards nor Tai or Katze had yet returned—all of them delayed, no doubt, by the snowstorm.

Sighing, he got up and went to the door. “Yes?” he asked impatiently, as he pressed on the intercom.

“Excuse me, this is Toma, from Lord Sami’s House? I’m to be Lord Mink’s new attendant?”

“Yes, yes. Splendid,” Iason replied, relieved to finally have someone to attend to him. The door hummed open and he motioned

Toma inside. "Come in, Toma. Welcome to my home."

Toma, surprised when the great Blondie answered the door himself, stared back at him, wide-eyed. "Lord Mink!"

"You'll have to excuse me. I'm sure you must have a thousand questions, but I've had a terrible day and am in no mood to explain, and there is no one here presently to train you, I'm afraid."

"No matter," Toma replied smoothly. "I'm sure I can still be of assistance. Can I get you something, Master Iason? A drink perhaps? I know my way around a bar, certainly."

"I'm drinking White Moon. You can refill my glass," Lord Mink answered, feeling extraordinarily grateful to Toma for stepping into his new role as attendant so quickly.

In truth, the Blondie was so accustomed to being served that he was not even aware of how much he relied on others to meet his every need; only in their absence did he realize the extent to which he depended on other members of his household to make his life comfortable. He did not, of course, see anything wrong with such an arrangement: after all, he was a Blondie, and Head of the Syndicate. He had been bred to be served, and he accepted such service without question. In this attitude, of course, he was no different than any of the other Elites.

He returned to his chair, sitting down with a great sigh. Though his head was no longer pounding, his headache, infuriatingly, still lingered. The day had proved taxing, to say the least. He held up his glass when Toma came to his chair with the wine bottle, holding up one hand when the glass was about three quarters full.

Toma glanced over at Riki, who was sitting in the corner of the room in chains, with his knees drawn up to his chest and his head buried on his arms. He was surprised to see him, having, of course, heard the alert that had been put out for him. Given the huge award Iason had offered for his return, however, it was hardly surprising he had been apprehended so quickly.

After he returned the wine bottle to the bar area, Toma took charge of the clothing and boots, obviously belonging to the mongrel, that were still on the floor of the foyer. He folded the shirt up neatly, and was shaking out the pants to remove the creases when something

fell to the floor. He bent down and retrieved the necklace, glancing at it briefly before placing it atop the clothes. Then he carried everything to Lord Mink.

The Blondie looked up at him as he approached. "Yes?"

"These were a bit damp," Toma explained, holding out the clothes. "Shall I put them by the fire?"

"Please do," Iason answered, his gaze moving to the necklace. He nodded at it. "What is that?"

"It fell out of his pocket," Toma answered, handing it to him.

Lord Mink took the necklace and then examined the pendant. He turned it over, his face going pale. Only then did Toma glance again at the inscription, this time with more interest: *Love, Guy*.

Who was Guy? And why had the Blondie pulled such a face? He waited for him to return the necklace but Iason continued to study it. Toma set Riki's clothes and boots in front of the fire. "Is there anything else I can get you, Sir?" he asked.

"No. Go sit down until I call you," Lord Mink ordered.

"Yes, Sir," Toma answered with a bow. "Let me just say, it is an honor to be part of your household. I hope you will be pleased with my service, Master."

The Blondie made no reply, and Toma, taking his silence as dismissal, dutifully retreated.

In fact, Iason had not even heard his remark. He was puzzling over the pendant, which he continued to hold. The inscription had surprised him, no question. Why was Riki keeping such a love token? Did he still harbor feelings for his old pairing partner, after all?

As if the day hadn't given him enough grief already, now he had one more thing to spoil his mood. With a sigh, he slipped the pendant into his pocket, though he continued to sit for some time, thinking about it.

Of Pets, Eunuchs & Leets

KATZE WAS IN SUCH A HURRY at the hospital that he didn't even wait for the elevator, taking the stairs two at a time as he rushed up to Reconstruction. He was so preoccupied with getting to Daryl before he woke up that he turned a corner too fast, unfortunately colliding hard into Lord Am.

"Watch your step," Raoul snapped angrily.

"I'm sorry," Katze mumbled, "that was quite my fault."

"Indeed it was," the Blondie agreed, though he softened a bit at Katze's acknowledgment. He straightened his tunic and brushed off the fabric with a few delicate sweeps of his gloved hands, as though mere contact with the attendant had somehow defiled him. "Did you find the mongrel?"

"Yes. Actually, Iason found him, though we're not quite sure how he managed it." Katze was impatient to move on but since the Blondie had addressed him, he now had to wait to be dismissed.

"Hmmm." Raoul suppressed a smile, imagining the punishment Riki would receive for running off. Having never been much of a student when it came to the General Code, he was unaware that the session would soon be broadcast on every street corner, just as the initial alert had been. "Where was he hiding, then?"

"Dana Burn."

Surprised, Raoul puzzled over this for a moment. Then he noticed Katze's obvious impatience and narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing here anyway? And why was Iason here earlier?"

“Daryl’s just had surgery,” Katze replied anxiously.

“Oh? What’s wrong with him?”

“He was thrown across the room and his kidneys were damaged,” Katze replied coolly. He said nothing more, but his eyes conveyed his anger.

Raoul blinked, suddenly realizing that the attendant was in the hospital because of something *he* had done. Daryl—the one who had bitten his ear. Although he did not really care what happened to him, he could see that Katze obviously bore some sort of affection for him—and Iason, too, judging from his even bothering to come to the hospital.

“Then,” he said with surprising gentleness and courtesy, “I shall not detain you.”

He stepped aside and Katze gratefully passed him, nodding his thanks, and made his way quickly to Daryl’s room. He was dismayed when he found his lover wide awake.

“Oh sweetheart,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry. I wanted to be here when you woke up. I promised I would be.”

Daryl smiled. “That’s okay. The nurse—that one blue-haired lady—told me that Riki ran away.”

Katze rolled his eyes, sighing. “Yes. I could kill the little prick. But he’s in for it, now: Iason found him. But fuck Riki. How are you? How’s the pain?”

“It’s not bad. They gave me something for it. The lady told me I have two perfectly good kidneys now.” He lowered his voice, giggling. “She’s treating me like a prince. She keeps fluffing up my pillow and bringing me ice chips.”

Katze shook his head. “Iason does it every time. She used to be a total hag.”

“I know!”

Eyes twinkling, Katze leaned down and kissed him. “Anyway, you seem like you’re in good spirits. I expected you to be more, I don’t know, helpless or something.”

Daryl frowned. “Do you want me to be more helpless?”

Katze laughed. “I want you,” he whispered, “to be *well* so you can move into my apartment.”

“And then we can make love every night!”

At this, Katze fell silent, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“What is it?” Daryl probed. “You have a funny look on your face.”

The red-haired eunuch sighed. “I guess I should just tell you. Those devices—we can’t use them any more. The doctors said your synthetic kidneys can’t handle the G-waves. In fact, what we were doing was hurting you, Daryl. I’m sorry. It’s my fault for introducing you to them.”

Daryl frowned. Though he was disappointed, the last thing he wanted was for Katze to feel bad about it. “That’s all right,” he replied softly. “It was fun while it lasted. We can still love each other, like how we did before.”

“Yeah,” Katze gazed down at him, love shining in his eyes, “we can always do that.”

“It’s too bad we can’t convince Iason to get us restored, the way Raoul might do for Yui.” Daryl said this without really thinking about it, just voicing a sudden wishful thought. But as soon as he said it, he and Katze stared at one another, the possibility then occurring to them both.

“Daryl! Why shouldn’t we ask him to restore us? We’re leaving his household; there’s technically no reason why we should still be modified!”

Excited, Katze swiped a hand through his hair, considering.

“He just might do it! I mean, if *Raoul* did it...he’s here, by the way, he and Yui both. They’re doing the restoration today, apparently. In fact, the surgery is probably already finished by now.”

“Truly? Raoul really went through with it?”

“Yes, he did. That’s got to have some influence on Iason. He’s not one to go completely by the rules anyway....oh, shit. Dammit!”

“What?”

“Well, we can’t ask him about this any time soon. Right now Iason is angry at me. I’m up for some punishment, because of Riki.”

“He’s going to punish you?” Daryl exclaimed, dismayed. “Oh, Katze! He’s not going to whip you again, is he?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say. He just said, ‘whether you’re sorry or not is irrelevant, you’ll still be punished’,” Katze answered, imitating

Iason's cool, silky-soft tone of voice.

"But it wasn't really your fault!"

Katze smiled. "And how would you know that?"

"Because I know Riki," Daryl retorted. "He's the one that ran off."

"Truthfully, I am a bit at fault. I should have known better than to trust him to go outside alone, and without his chains. Although, in my defense, Iason *should* have told me he wasn't wearing his pet ring."

"Riki didn't give a thought to you or what would happen to you," Daryl continued angrily. "That little brat!"

"Yes, I must admit, I'm still rather pissed at him at the moment."

Daryl sighed. "But, do you really think Iason might agree to have us restored, down the road?"

"I don't know. We'll wait until the moment's right, and then I'll ask him."

"That would be so amazing, Katze."

The amber-eyed eunuch sat down on the bed next to him. "We shouldn't count on it, though. It's more likely he'll say no."

Daryl nodded, though his eyes conveyed his hope.

"Your color looks so much better than before," Katze remarked, brushing the hair back from his eyes.

"Katze?"

"Yes?"

"I want you to kiss me."

Smiling, Katze obeyed the mandate, holding Daryl's head in his hands as he kissed him slowly and thoroughly, pouring every bit of the love in his heart into the kiss. And though he'd told Daryl not to hope for restoration, he desperately wanted it, not even so much for himself, but for Daryl. He longed to hear his lover cry out, to give him the pleasure he had never been able to give—not even with the G-wave devices, really.

Much as they had enjoyed the devices, Katze knew there was something intangibly different about a natural orgasm. He longed for a deeper intimacy that came only with being inside a partner, the incomparable pleasure of penetration, or of giving oneself up for submissive acquisition. Unlike Daryl, Katze knew—or at least vaguely remembered—what it felt like to love and be loved as a fully-equipped

male, and he wanted the same for his partner.

If he had to, he'd get on his knees and *beg* Iason to help them.



AS SOON AS OMAKI OPENED the door, Aki came running.

"I missed you!" he shouted, hugging his legs.

Smiling, Lord Ghan picked him up and kissed him on the cheek. "I missed you, too, even though I've only been gone an hour."

"Sir Yousi!" Aki exclaimed when he saw the Blondie.

"Hello, Aki," Yousi replied. He rather liked the little boy, who Omaki sometimes brought with him to the shop, although he had admittedly been known to knock over a few displays from time to time. Still, he didn't mind cleaning up after him and found him far more interesting than many of his customers. "Are you a commander today?"

Aki was wearing a helmet and a cape and was carrying a purple laser gun. "Yes, I'm Commander Aki," he replied solemnly.

"I thought so. You're not going to shoot me with that are you?" Yousi asked nervously.

Aki giggled. "It's not real."

"It *looks* real," Yousi remarked thoughtfully. "Is it a hologram?"

Aki laughed again. "It's real, but it doesn't have...laser thingies inside." He arched his fingers, moving his hands toward each other, apparently to illustrate the laser properties which were sadly—or perhaps thankfully—lacking in his laser toy.

"Oh." Yousi returned the smile. "Ah yes. No laser thingies. Then I'm safe."

"But I can still squirt you!" Aki yelled, surprising Yousi with a blast of water.

"Aki," Lord Ghan scolded, putting the boy back down. "You just yelled in my ear. And you shouldn't have squirted Yousi—now he's all wet."

"I'm sorry, Sir Yousi," Aki mumbled, looking sad.

Yousi, who had been rather startled at being squirted with water, studied his tunic for a moment and then smiled. "No harm done. But

if we're going to be fair about it, I should be able to squirt *you*." He leaned down in a mock threatening manner and reached out as if to grab him, eliciting a squeal of delight from Aki, who then ran out of the room.

Enyu, Kahlan and Ru all came into the great hall to see what the commotion was.

"Ah, Ru. I need you to make an Aristian Chocolate Cake tonight. Can you do that?" Omaki asked.

"Of course, Master," Ru answered eagerly.

"Mmmm," Kahlan moaned. "I haven't had one of those in ages."

"It's my favorite cake," Yousi announced.

"Yousi will be staying with us tonight. Ru, it seems a bit chilly. Why is there no fire?"

"I'll start it," Kahlan offered, winking at Ru. "He needs to get busy on that cake."

"I'm sorry, Master," Ru answered, staring at the cold hearth and feeling a bit foolish. He'd been daydreaming again...about Kahlan, actually, and had let the fire die out.

"Don't let it happen again," Omaki replied with a sly smile, "or I shall have to spank you."

Ru stared back suspiciously, wondering if he was teasing or not.

Enyu, dismayed that his Master had not even greeted him properly, and feeling jealous of Omaki's promise to spank Ru—which he was sure was intended as a *fun* kind of spanking—pouted. "I want to be spanked, too," he whined.

This immediately garnered the Blondie's full attention. "Do you now, my pretty pet?" He walked toward Enyu, and then stopped before him, tipping his chin up with his finger. "Are you quite sure?"

"I meant if you were going to spank Ru," the Xeronian replied quickly.

"I see." Omaki smiled, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he bent down to whisper in his ear. "Then perhaps I shall spank you later. Come to my bed tonight, pet."

"Yes, Master," Enyu chirped happily.

Yousi, feeling a little confused by all the talk of spankings despite the fact that he owned a bondage and discipline shop, looked around

the great hall, admiring its beauty. Everything seemed, somehow, very familiar, though he could not specifically remember being there before. Then his eyes rested on a messenger capsule that was lying on a small table. He immediately walked toward it, mesmerized.

There was something about that container. Something important. He studied it for a long moment, his brow furrowed.

Omaki, who then realized what Yousi was looking at, watched him, his heart racing.

Slowly, Lord Xuuju picked up the container and simply held it in his hands.

Suddenly, a series of images flooded his thoughts: his computer, some calculations of some kind...his villa...and he was writing... writing in a journal. But what? What was he writing? Yousi concentrated with all his might, feeling that it was of critical importance. His head felt as though it would split open!

Distracted by his mental confusion, Yousi dropped the capsule, which went crashing into the table, shattering the glass. "I'm sorry, Omaki," he whispered, looking down with horror at the mess he'd just made.

Omaki was immediately at his side, coaxing him to sit down. "There's not a thing to be sorry about. Not a thing, old friend."

"That capsule," Yousi began, and then he shook his head, unable to focus his thoughts.

Lord Ghan, though desperate to know exactly what Yousi had remembered, felt that he needed some calming down first.

"Ru. Bring Yousi some tea—make sure it's a relaxing blend."

"Yes, Sir."

"*Relaxing*, Ru," Omaki repeated.

The attendant nodded, dashing into the kitchen. He was followed by Kahlan and Enyu, both of whom, perceiving that something was amiss with Yousi, decided they'd best give their Master some privacy with him.

"I broke your table."

"The table be damned," the Blondie replied. "I was going to throw it out, anyway. It's no good for anything except putting things on."

Yousi, actually catching the humor, smiled. "You're a good friend,

Omaki.”

Lord Ghan was touched; the way Yousi looked at him—his whole manner of speaking—was so much like the old Yousi that he was momentarily rendered speechless. “I will always be your friend,” he replied finally.

“Something’s happening to me.”

Lord Ghan nodded. “I can see that.”

“Do you know what’s happening to me?”

“No, Yousi, I don’t. Although I’ll tell you what it seems like—and I really don’t know how this is possible—but it *seems* as though maybe you’re starting to...*remember*.”

“Yes,” Lord Xuuju agreed eagerly, “I’m starting to remember. But what am I remembering? Will you tell me? What happened to me? Why did Jupiter take away my memories?”

“I promise I will tell you, when the time is right,” Omaki answered gently. “Let’s not move too fast, here. I don’t quite understand how you can be having *any* sort of memories, so I don’t want to move you into new territory, too fast.”

“I don’t want to move, either,” Yousi replied, blinking. “I like my house.”

Lord Ghan, unable to help laughing at this, patted the Blondie on the back. “You’ll be just fine, old friend.”

“And here we are! Tea and biscuits,” Ru announced, bringing in the tray.

This secured Yousi’s immediate interest. He raised his head to peek at the tray and see what sort of cookies Ru had brought.

“Chocolate butter biscuits!” he exclaimed with delight.

At that moment, Aki came running back into the great hall, having heard the word “biscuits” from the closet where he’d been hiding in hopes that Yousi would come after him.

“Aki!” Omaki shouted, scooping him up before he ran barefooted onto the broken glass.

Surprised, Aki looked down at the glass and, realizing that his Master had just saved him from certain injury, kissed him on the cheek. “I love you, Master,” he said, with unaffected sweetness.

The Blondie, suddenly overcome with emotion, gave him a fierce

hug, closing his eyes as he held Aki close.

The others watched this tender display in silence. They all knew that Omaki was heartbroken over the fact that Aki was leaving; in fact, all of them were rather saddened by it. The little boy brought life and excitement to the home and would be sorely missed.

"I'll clean up this glass," Ru muttered, kneeling to pick up the broken pieces.

"I'll help you." Kahlan knelt down beside him, gifting him with a heart-stopping smile.

Ru returned the smile, blood rushing to his groin. Was he mistaken, or was Kahlan *flirting* with him?

"I love Aristian chocolate cake," Kahlan whispered. "Can I watch you make it?"

"Of course," Ru whispered back.

"You're squeezing all my air out," Aki complained finally.

"I'm sorry, my little love," Lord Ghan answered, relaxing his hold. "You're so squeezable, it's hard to resist squeezing you."

"But what if my head pops off?"

The Blondie gave him an indulgent smile. "You needn't worry about that."

"Can I have a cookie?"

"If you eat it in the kitchen, then yes, you may have one." Omaki set him down, away from the broken glass, and handed him a cookie.

Ru and Kahlan carried the larger pieces of glass to the trash unit, and then Ru sent in the floor-bot to sweep up the rest.

Pacified with the acquisition of the wanted chocolate butter biscuit, Aki dutifully went into the kitchen, excited when it became apparent that Ru was going to bake a cake.

Yousi, having consumed four biscuits in fairly rapid succession as well as one and a half cups of tea, suddenly put his teacup down on the tray.

"I am tired," he announced.

"Would you like to go to bed now, Yousi?" Lord Ghan asked. It was early in the evening, but his old companion looked as though he could certainly use a good night's sleep.

"Yes. But I don't have a bed to sleep in here."

“Of course you do. I’ll show you. I have plenty of guestrooms. Come, I’ll take you to your room.”

With a sigh, Yousi rose, following the Blondie down the hall to one of the rooms, where he immediately lay down on the bed.

“Would you like a night shirt, Yousi?”

“No. I am too tired to change. I am just going to sleep like this.”

“Then, good night, old friend,” Omaki whispered.

“Good night, Omi.”

Lord Ghan stood very still for a moment. Yousi had not called him by that name since the Academy days. It had been Yousi’s special nickname for him, one that his closest friends had quickly adopted as well. He shut the door behind him as he left, puzzling over the Blondie’s returning memories.

He went to the kitchen, where Aki was standing up in his chair. “We’re making a cake!” he proclaimed.

“Yousi’s gone to bed.”

Aki, completely perplexed at the notion of a Blondie going to bed before he did, simply stared at him in disbelief.

“What about the cake?” Ru asked.

“We’ll have it tomorrow. Go ahead and make it tonight, if you like.” Now Omaki turned to Aki. “You’ve finished your cookie, I see. That means it’s time for your bath.”

“But I want to help bake the cake!” Aki yelled.

“Hush, Aki,” the Blondie said sharply. “Yousi’s trying to sleep. Now, you heard me. Go take your bath NOW.”

“No!”

Omaki took two steps forward and, grabbing the boy’s arm, proceeded to administer a few hard smacks to his bottom. “Mind me, Aki. Do you want a real spanking? Shall I get out the paddle?”

“No,” Aki answered, reaching back to rub his ass and frowning. The swats had very effectively reminded him that punishment was *not* something he enjoyed.

“Then do as I say.”

Aki sighed and crawled down off the chair, dutifully trudging off to the bath hall.

Lord Ghan turned to Enyu, who had been watching the scene with



☪ Omaki Ghan ☪
Art by Tata

great interest. "Come, pet," he commanded, with a little smile.

"Now?"

"Yes, Enyu. *Now*."

Omaki reached out and seized his wrist, and then led him to the Master bedroom, where he locked the door behind them. "We have just enough time."

"Time for what?"

"Time for your spanking, of course. And a nice little fuck, I believe."

"You're not *really* going to spank me, are you?"

"What? Aren't you the one who asked for it?" The Blondie's eyes shone impishly as he watched Enyu's obvious discomfort.

"Yes, but...that is, you're not going to spank me *very* hard, are you?"

"I shall spank you precisely as hard as I wish."

"But how hard is that?"

"*Hard*."

"But," Enyu backed away nervously until he bumped into the bed.

"You should see the look on your face. Priceless." Lord Ghan whispered, smiling as he approached him. "Have you forgotten how we discussed this not so long ago? I said I thought you needed a good spanking."

"But Master, I'd really rather not."

Omaki laughed, and then sat down on the bed. "Good. That makes it more fun for me. Now, pull up your robe."

Enyu did so, embarrassed that he was clearly aroused, despite all his protests.

The Blondie noted his erection, trying to suppress a smile, and then pulled him firmly over his knees, pushing his robe up to the middle of his back and then tugging his undergarments down to his knees. "So, my naughty little pet wants a spanking," he whispered, his voice trembling from excitement.

"Not...not really," Enyu stammered.

"Isn't that what you said earlier? You announced it in front of everyone in the great hall. It's too late to take it back now, Enyu. You wanted a spanking, and I certainly want to give you one."

“But I thought you said it was better if I *didn't* want it!”

“It’s good that you wanted it before, but now that it’s imminent, you find you really *don't* want it,” Lord Ghan hinted. “That’s the game.”

“Then you’re not really going to spank me? This is just a game?”

“Oh yes, I most certainly am. It’s a spanking game, and I’m afraid a good, hard spanking comprises the entirety of the game.”

“I don’t like this game!”

“Hush, pet,” Omaki commanded sternly, though he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. “I am the Master, or had you forgotten? In my house, we play whatever games *I* wish to play, whenever *I* want to play them.”

With that, he whipped off his glove and proceeded to unleash on Enyu’s ass, much to the pet’s complete mortification and dismay. He had privately expected his Master to only give him a teasing, erotic spanking, but Omaki opted for something quite different. He struggled not to cry out, embarrassed that Kahlan and Ru could most likely hear him. But eventually the strong Blondie broke him down, and Enyu began pleading for a cessation to his punishment.

Lord Ghan was, of course, enjoying himself thoroughly, relishing his pet’s desperate squirming on his lap, his gradually reddening flesh, and his adorable little whimpers and cries. “Naughty pet,” he scolded, grinning.

Enyu, feeling keenly the injustice of being called *naughty* when he had done nothing wrong, managed to reach back in an attempt to cover his bare ass from further assault. Delighted, the Blondie grabbed his hand, pinning it firmly with the other against his back. “I’m not sure I’m spanking you hard enough,” he commented, giving him a few exceptionally loud whacks.

“You are! You *are* spanking me hard enough! Harder than Master Iason, even!”

“Oh, so Iason spanked you, did he?” Omaki raised a brow at this, wondering what else the Blondie did to the enticing Xeronian. “That scoundrel! Did you engage in coital pleasures as well?”

“What?” Enyu whimpered. Though his Amoian was excellent, he didn’t understand the expression *coital pleasures*.

“Did he *fuck* you?”

“Yes,” Enyu admitted. “*Owww! Oh! Please* stop, Master!”

“And did you enjoy it, pet, when he took you?”

The Xeronian was smart enough to hesitate before replying, though Lord Ghan was bent on getting his answer.

“Answer me, pet! Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes! Yes, I enjoyed it!”

Omaki felt an unexpected surge of jealousy and purposely gave Enyu a few especially hard smacks, abandoning the spanking “game” as he administered some *real* discipline. He wasn’t even precisely sure why he was punishing his pet, for it was not as if the Xeronian had done anything wrong. Of course he had enjoyed sex with Iason. Who wouldn’t?

“But not more than *you*, Master!” Enyu added desperately, after whimpering and squirming uncomfortably under the Blondie’s more aggressive onslaught.

Pleased with this declaration, and now fully aroused, Lord Ghan suddenly stopped. He kept the Xeronian over his lap for a few minutes, enjoying the view of his thoroughly punished ass positioned so submissively over his knees, his cheeks red as an Amoian late autumn cherry. He brushed his fingertips over his hot flesh as he unfastened his trousers to free his erection.

“On your feet,” he commanded.

Enyu reached back to pull up his undergarments.

The Blondie swatted his hand. “What are you doing? Those are coming off,” he announced, seizing the undergarments and pulling them down as he helped the Xeronian to his feet.

Enyu rubbed his ass, frowning. “I’m not in the mood for sex, Master,” he whispered meekly.

Lord Ghan laughed at this. “I don’t care whether you’re in the mood or not, pet. Now, bend over the edge of the bed and lift your robe for me.”

“Yes, Master.”

The Blondie seized a tube of sex jelly from an impressive collection of lubricants that crowded his bedside table, squeezing the slick ointment onto his fingers as his pet got into position. He wiggled a

single finger inside him but couldn't insert a second, for Enyu's sex hole was clamped down tight around the digit.

"Relax," he ordered impatiently.

The Xeronian made a valiant attempt to relax his muscles, but found he was too upset. His ass was still stinging horribly from the spanking, but more than this, he felt confused by the Blondie's unusually stern manner.

Sensing his unhappiness, Lord Ghan pressed his body against him from behind and began whispering in his ear. "Come now, Enyu. Be a good pet for me. I promise later I'll pleasure you however you want. You can even take me or punish me if you choose: anything you want."

"Anything?" Enyu repeated, smiling slyly.

"Yes, *anything*, pet. We'll play *your* game later."

Consoled and intrigued by this offer, Enyu was able to relax his grip on his Master, all his thoughts wrapped around this promised new "game."

Omaki wiggled two more fingers inside him, biting his lip. "There's a good boy."

He withdrew his fingers and pushed his skin-tight leather pants down to his thighs, hissing with pleasure as he coated his cock with more of the lubricant.

"I'm about ready to burst," he confessed. "I'm sorry, Enyu, but I'm going to stretch you open this time. It's going to sting, but it shouldn't take long."

"I understand, Master," his pet said quietly.

"Good. Now, reach back and spread those ass cheeks apart for me," Lord Ghan demanded. "Tell me you're ready to be fucked *hard*."

With endearing obedience, the Xeronian did just as requested, offering himself. "I'm ready, Master. Fuck me hard."

"Ohhhh, that's very good," Omaki praised, continuing to fondle himself, his cock pressed eagerly against Enyu's sphincter. He lowered his voice to a mere whisper. "You have no idea how stimulating this is. I'm certainly enjoying the view. Keep holding yourself open for me, and say it again, Enyu."

"Fuck me, Master, fuck me *hard*!"

“Well, if you *insist*,” Lord Ghan replied, sliding past his portal and into his depths.

Enyu gave a loud wail of dismay. His restrictive Xeronian physiology prevented him from ever being truly broken in, a trait that made sex, at least initially, always painful for him, though undeniably pleasurable for his partners. Despite the pain he remained dutifully positioned, holding his ass cheeks apart with his hands.

“Mmmmn,” Omaki moaned. “Great Jupiter! You’re so hot and *tight*, pet! Tight as a virgin, each time I take you!”

The Blondie relished his embrace for a few seconds before he proceeded to rock into him with unabashed fury, too aroused to rein in his seed. He allowed the trajectory of the fuck to take its natural course and within moments cried out his release, ejaculating hard into Enyu’s receptive sanctum.

“Sweet Astrajia,” he gasped.

At that point Aki could be heard running through the house. Omaki slowly withdrew, sighing as he did so. “I’m sorry, pet. You’ll have to wait until later, when Aki is in bed, but I *will* make good my promise.”

“Yes, Master,” the Xeronian chirped happily.

Lord Ghan smiled. “Your mood seems to have improved. Are you looking forward to playing our little game?”

“I am,” his pet admitted with a devious grin.

Omaki helped him to his feet, laughing at the look on his face. “You have an agenda worked out for me already, then?”

Enyu nodded, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Oh, dear. Perhaps I offered myself up too quickly.”

At this, Enyu’s expression betrayed his worry that his Master might withdraw the offer, inciting another laugh from the leather-clad Blondie. “Don’t worry, pet. I never go back on a promise.”

Reassured by this, the Xeronian relaxed. “Did you enjoy that, Master?” he purred, knowing full well how the Blondie would respond.

“Of course I did,” Omaki whispered, bending down to kiss him. “You were exceptional. I promise I won’t spank you too often. Ah, but, it *did* excite me terribly. And once Aki’s not around to spank, I shall

have to spank *someone* every once in awhile, just to show I'm Master of this house."

"Spank Ru," Enyu suggested, frowning.

"I will be sure to tell him you ordered it," the Blondie answered with a wink.

"No, don't tell him! I wasn't serious. And he might put a...frog or something in my soup."

"I'm glad you weren't serious, because I don't want to spank Ru. I want to spank *you*."

Enyu looked decidedly unenthusiastic about this announcement, eliciting yet another laugh from the Blondie.

"I wish you could see your face, pet. You amuse me."

"Master!" Aki yelled from somewhere in the house, having completely forgotten, by this time, Lord Ghan's mandate to be quiet.

"Aki," Omaki growled, annoyed.

"Don't be too hard on him. I think we were pretty noisy in here just now," Enyu pointed out.

"Even so, I told him to be quiet." Omaki got up and went out into the great hall, where he found Aki running in a wide circle, making a very loud, bizarre noise for no particular reason.

"What did I tell you, Aki?" he scolded, scooping him up. "Yousi is trying to sleep."

"But I'm a hovercraft!"

"Did you hear what I just said? Settle down now, it's almost time for bed. You need to wind down."

"But I don't want to wind down!" Aki screamed.

Without another word, Omaki sat down, pulled him over his knee, and gave a few quite hard, warning spanks, resting his hand on his bottom. "Do I need to give you a real spanking tonight after all?"

Aki, lying limply over his lap, suddenly seemed cognizant of his peril. "No."

"I'm not going to warn you again. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I'll be good now. I promise."

"Very well." The Blondie lifted him up, setting him on his lap.

Now completely docile, Aki leaned back against him, sighing contentedly. "Why did Sir Yousi go to bed so early?"

“Because he was tired.”

“Did he break the table?”

“Yes, little one.”

“Is he getting a spanking?” Aki demanded.

Omaki smiled tolerantly. “No, Aki.”

“Why not?” Aki asked, indignant that Yousi should be spared the discipline that *he* certainly would have gotten, had *he* broken the table.

“Because Yousi is grown up.”

“So when I’m grown up, I can break things without getting spanked?”

“Well, I don’t know about that, little sweet.”

“But you just said—”

“Yousi is also a Blondie—an Elite.”

Aki fell silent for a moment. “What am I?” he asked finally.

“You, my darling boy, are going to be my pet one day.”

“Then why am I going to that school—the Academy for Leets?”

“Because Master Iason wishes you to be raised as an Elite,” Omaki replied, suddenly feeling a little nervous about the direction of the conversation.

“But you said I’m going to be your pet.”

The Blondie sighed, gathering his thoughts before he spoke again. “What I meant, Aki, is that I very much *want* you to be my pet one day. But Master Iason wishes you to be raised as an Elite so you can decide for yourself what you want to do.”

Aki thought about this for a moment, his head resting against Omaki’s chest. “Can I still be a Commander if I am a pet?”

“No. If you are a pet, you will belong to your Master. That means you would belong to me.”

“Oh.” Disappointed, Aki began playing with the straps on the Blondie’s leather vest. “And if I am a Leet, I’ll belong to myself?”

Lord Ghan did not reply immediately but instead kissed the top of his head to force back the rising tide of emotion threatening to overtake him. “You have plenty of time to think about what you want to do.”

“But what exactly *is* a pet?”

“You know what a pet is, Aki. Enyu is a pet. A pet is a servant who gives pleasure to his Master in special ways.”

For the first time, Aki suddenly had a glimmering of what his Master expected from him one day. And he found there was a wide gap between this role of pet and what he had already planned for himself: to become a great military Commander and take over all of Amoi. But he loved his Master and wanted to please him. Troubled by these thoughts, he began sucking his thumb.

“Aki,” the Blondie scolded gently, “you’re a bit old to be sucking your thumb now. Have you forgotten what a big boy you are?”

“My head hurts,” he whimpered.

Startled, Omaki immediately felt his forehead. “You don’t feel warm,” he stated, relieved. “You have a headache, though? Let’s see what we can give you for that.” He stood up, carrying Aki into the bath hall where he found the appropriate analgesic.

Aki swallowed the pill, drinking the entire glass of water and then resting his head on Lord Ghan’s shoulder. “I’m tired, Master. I wanna go to bed.”

“All right.”

Omaki carried him to his bed, puzzled over Aki’s sudden change in behavior. He had never before asked to be put to bed, and he was worried that their conversation had been initiated prematurely and that Aki had found it disturbing.

Placing the boy in his bed and helping him get settled under the covers, he sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, stroking Aki’s temple with his thumb. “What I want most for you, little love, is for you to be happy. Right now you should simply enjoy being young. There’s no need for you to worry about the future.”

Aki smiled at this, closing his eyes with a contented sigh. Lord Ghan bent down and kissed him, but continued to stay with him for a while until he was sure the boy was sound asleep.

Katze Gets the Rod

IASON SAT BY THE IMMENSE, ARCHED window by the fireplace, gazing out at Tanagura as darkness descended on the city. Both moons were rising in luminous gold, brilliant against the star-ravished sky.

His thoughts flitted from one subject to another, as though propelled by an inner force that would not allow him to rest until every worry had been visited, and then revisited, time and again.

He thought, first and foremost, about Riki. His heart was aching dreadfully over his running away, and he could not seem to get past it; even as his thoughts temporarily wandered to some other worry, he eventually found his mind once again wrapped around his pet. He had been forced to punish him more severely than he ever had before, and Riki was still horribly out of spirits, hours later. He seemed extraordinarily unhappy, so unhappy that Iason almost regretted putting him back in chains. If he could have predicted the mongrel would be *this* miserable, he might have reconsidered, even though he knew Riki deserved it.

The pendant Riki had kept from Guy was another source of angst to the Blondie. It confused him, especially after Iason had witnessed what Riki had done to him and the rest of Bison. Perhaps the mongrel's harsh treatment of Guy had been masking deeper feelings of hurt—even love? After all, Riki had spent his week in Ceres with his old pairing partner, hadn't he? Still, after Riki had been his pet—his very *special* pet—for such a long time, Iason found it disappointing that he still apparently had feelings for Guy.

He wondered, too, about Voshka Khosi's visit, trying to decide how he would meet the Commander's advances, for he was convinced the man intended to seduce him. This was a peripheral concern; privately he found him to be enormously attractive and knew he would have no difficulty responding appropriately when the time came.

The core of his anxiety regarding Voshka Khosi was, of course, his relation to Anori. The two were completely entangled in his thoughts and emotions, and he worried that somehow the Commander would ferret out his guilt, that through some fraternal intuition he would discover the truth of what he had done. He could not even allow himself to consider the consequences if this should happen: it would no doubt be disastrous, not only for him but also for Amoi.

And, of course, he worried about Jupiter, brooding over her ultimatum that Riki could only remain his pet for one more year. Perhaps he could persuade her to reconsider, but what if he could not? He would never give up Riki.

He would sooner bring Jupiter down.

This last thought filled him with anxiety but also a bit of hopeful excitement. He knew it was *possible* to bring Jupiter down, or at least, he knew Yousi had believed it was. He knew, too, he was not alone in his weariness of her laws and restrictions: he felt certain he had allies, should he pursue the plan architected in Yousi's logs. Omaki had already given him his support. Xian owed him a debt, as did Raoul.

As for Raoul...Iason shook his head slightly, unable to believe that his old lover had convinced Heiku to restore Yui. Both Blondies were taking tremendous risks in collaborating to accomplish an unsanctioned modification.

"How much longer are you going to make me wear these?" Riki demanded from the corner of the room.

"Until I am ready to remove them," Iason replied, not even looking in his direction.

"You already punished me," the mongrel pointed out. "Or are you saying my punishment isn't over yet?"

It was the first Riki had spoken since his caning, and the Blondie, in truth, was relieved to hear him finally voice his complaints, as his silence had been unsettling. He had grown so accustomed to the

mongrel's usual defiant ways that any variation in his behavior was, in a very real sense, disturbing. He expected Riki to sulk, certainly, but not to seem *completely* out of sorts, as he had for the past few hours.

As long as Riki played the part of the bitter, punished pet, Iason easily assumed his role as Master. Such a part came naturally to him, so naturally that, when the mongrel failed to answer his punishment with angry defiance and resentment, the Blondie hardly knew what to do. This Master/pet dynamic was deeply embedded in their relationship, a synergy of domination and reluctant, tenuous submission that he was now quite comfortable with—and perhaps, ironically, always would be, even when their relationship strained to move beyond those boundaries, as it now sometimes did.

The truth of the matter was, when Lord Mink had resolved to *break* Riki, he had not been prepared to be successful. He found he very much disliked the face of utter dejection and despair that the mongrel had worn since his punishment. So he greeted the mongrel's more familiar, complaining attitude with relief, though one would probably not have guessed it from his stern, uncompromising answer.

"I already told you that you are back in training. You will remain in chains until you have convinced me that you acknowledge and accept that you are my pet."

"I already told you I wouldn't run away again," the mongrel grumbled.

"That is not enough. Acknowledge me as your Master, and that you will henceforth obey me in every respect, and I will unchain you," Iason answered.

"Bloody hell," Riki groaned. "You're addicted to power, you know that? You always have to be in control, don't you?"

"I am not addicted to power, as you put it, but it seems you have forgotten—"

"*Which one of us is Master,*" the mongrel finished in a mocking tone, his voice overlapping with Iason's as the Blondie said the same words.

"Riki," Iason scolded, frowning.

"Well, how could I forget when you've told me a thousand times?"

“That is a very good question.”

“My ass is killing me, and this floor is bloody cold and hard. I’m tired and hungry, and I need a drink—and a smoke, too, for that matter.”

“Are you prepared to tell me what I want to hear?” Lord Mink challenged.

The mongrel fell silent, his pride and anger over his brutal punishment preventing him from answering. He knew all he had to do was speak a few submissive words, yet he could not bring himself to open his mouth to do so.

The caning had been truly barbaric. Riki had been surprised at its severity, though at the time he told himself he deserved it for what he had done to Kei. That thought alone had allowed him to endure the agony of the cane, which took him beyond his limit to a whole new level of pain. His backside was aching horribly and it was pure torture sitting on the hard floor. He wanted to lie on his stomach but refused to do so, not wanting to give the Blondie the satisfaction of seeing how much distress he was in.

At first, he had been utterly miserable from his punishment and from the memory of what had happened at Dana Burn. He felt despair and remorse over killing Kei and couldn’t seem to get the incident out of his mind. After awhile, however, his physical pain began to outweigh his emotional pain.

He deeply resented Iason for punishing him so severely, even though he knew it was only to be expected. The fact that the Blondie had put him in chains again was infuriating, even insulting. It brought back deeply buried, painful memories of his first days at the penthouse, and made him very much aware of the one thing he had so much difficulty accepting: that he was Iason’s pet.

His sulking, however, was starting to reach a breaking point: he could not sit much longer on that cold, hard floor. And, infuriatingly, he had needs to attend to, though he couldn’t bring himself to ask the Blondie for something to relieve himself with. No, he *would not* piss in a jar!

Lord Mink watched him, almost smiling to himself. He could predict what would happen next. The mongrel would continue to sulk

for awhile, but eventually his discomfort and humiliation would become overwhelming and he would be forced to beg for an end to his torment. He would speak the words required of him, and then, finally, Iason would release him from his chains.

Then, perhaps, they would adjourn to the bedroom and move onto an agenda that would be far more pleasurable for them both.

“Master Iason,” Toma interrupted softly, “I’m sorry to disturb you, but there’s an incoming for you, from Commander Khosi.”

“Ah. Yes.” Lord Mink rose and went to the terminal, sitting down in front of the screen. He flipped the monitor on for full visual.

Voshka smiled as soon as he saw him. “Iason. Good to see you—you’re quite the sight for sore eyes, I must say. Breathtaking, in fact. Forgive me for disturbing you, but I wanted to confirm our arrangements.”

“It is no inconvenience whatsoever, Commander. We are all looking forward to your arrival.”

“We? And what about *you*, Iason? Are *you* looking forward to my arrival?”

“Certainly; I will be delighted to meet you face to face. Do you have an idea about when precisely that might be?”

“Tomorrow. I didn’t want to tell you before, as I prefer to keep my agenda under wraps until the last possible moment, for security reasons. I hope that will be acceptable?”

Although privately alarmed, having not expected the Commander to arrive for several days yet, the Blondie’s dispassionate expression did not betray his inner panic. “What time?”

“My estimate is early evening, some time after sunset.”

“Will you have dinner with us?”

“Dinner would be excellent,” Voshka leaned forward, a meaningful smile tugging at his lips, “and I confess to having a penchant for dessert. Perhaps you might offer me a taste of what Amoi is most famous for.”

Choosing to ignore this remark, Lord Mink lowered his gaze for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “How was your journey?”

Voshka laughed, leaning back in his chair again. “So we’re back to pleasantries, then. I can see I have my work cut out for me. But I

enjoy a good challenge, Iason. My journey has been pleasant enough, though I will be glad to be off this ship. I foolishly neglected to bring any of my harem boys with me and have spent the past few weeks in my own company, if you get my meaning. I'm quite anxious to take a peek at your famous auction-house, I must say."

"I'm sure we can accommodate you, Commander," Iason assured him. "We have a new line of A-class pets just graduated from the Academy as well as a shipment of exotics from Gardan. In fact, I'll be holding a private auction at my home during your visit, which you're welcome to attend."

"A private auction, hmmm? A little cherry-picking, I presume?"

Lord Mink laughed. "Yes, I confess to it. I have friends coming for a party, you see, and I wanted to give them an opportunity to bid on a few of the more exceptional offerings."

"I see your position as Syndicate Head has some advantages," Voshka remarked. "Count me in. Though I confess, it will be hard to concentrate on the auction with *you* in the room."

"Is there anything special I can do to prepare for your arrival?" Lord Mink asked, after another awkward pause.

"Actually, yes. I do have one small request. Could you put me in the same room where my brother stayed?"

Though horrified at the mention of Anori, the Blondie managed once again to keep a neutral expression frozen on his face. "Certainly, if it pleases you."

"Yes, it pleases me," the Commander smiled. "And, I must confess, I'm looking forward to finding out what I can do to please *you*. Or perhaps you'd like to tell me now?"

"Tell him to fuck off," Riki suggested.

"What was that?" Voshka asked, obviously a bit taken aback.

"Pet," Iason hissed, turning to glare at the mongrel. "You will remain SILENT!"

Lord Mink turned back to the monitor, wondering if the Commander had heard exactly what Riki had said. "Please accept my apology. My pet is...at times, a bit unruly."

Voshka visibly relaxed, smiling. "Ah, your pet. I see. Personally, I rather prefer the unruly ones to the docile, mindless fare that's

flooding the Quadrant these days.”

“In fact, I quite agree with you, although at times I confess Riki tests my patience—indeed, my very limits.”

“You agree with me? I find that rather surprising. Very surprising, actually, given that your...position. Isn’t that what the Syndicate is famous for, your submissive pets with inbred controls and whatnot?”

“Yes,” Iason agreed. “The Syndicate supplies what is generally demanded: docility. I’m...a bit of a deviant, in that regard.”

The Commander arched a brow, grinning. “A bit of a deviant? Mmmm. I like the sound of that.”

“I’m afraid so.” Feeling the need to make up for Riki’s rudeness, Lord Mink lowered his gaze for a moment and then looked directly at him with a smile that was a bit more than just friendly.

“I think my heart just stopped,” Voshka announced, putting his hand on his chest. “Yes. I am quite dead.”

The Blondie laughed softly, genuinely charmed by the man’s intoxicating charisma.

“Goodness, I must confess, you’ve quite perplexed me. I have to tell you, I’m getting mixed signals from you—either that, or I simply don’t know how to read you yet. You are very elusive, Iason.”

At that moment, an incoming alert from Jupiter flashed onto the screen.

“Forgive me, I must go,” Iason whispered, straightening in alarm. “I’ve just received a summons from Jupiter.”

“I’ve frightened you off, I fear.”

“No, no. It truly is a summons. One I cannot ignore.”

“Then...until we meet tomorrow.”

“Until then, Commander.”

Iason ended the transmission and accepted Jupiter’s signal. The sentient computer came onscreen.

“Your pet just insulted the ruler of Alpha Zen,” Jupiter stated, without any other greeting.

“My apologies. In his defense, he is in a good deal of pain after his punishment. Surely you saw the session—it was submitted to Registration?”

“I saw. It was the least he deserved. A runaway pet, Iason? All of

Amoi is now aware that you are unable to control that mongrel. Surely this should make you rethink the wisdom of keeping him.”

Lord Mink remained silent, reluctant to say anything that might encourage the conversation to continue down the trajectory Jupiter had initiated. She had already given him license to keep Riki for a full year; why must he argue with her yet again about it?

“So, am I to understand that the Commander is staying with you for the duration of the Trade Convention?”

Jupiter’s question puzzled the Blondie, who had simply assumed their earlier conversation had been monitored, as usual, and that she was already fully aware of the invitation he had extended to the Commander.

“Yes; in fact, I was hoping to speak with you about it. My Head of Security is concerned.”

“As he well should be: Commander Khosi is a very dangerous man to have in your home, especially after the fall of the Senate on Alpha Zen. The entire Quadrant has its eye on him now, as you well know. He has many enemies. You will require increased security and an entourage for the duration of the visit. I will arrange for full protection. How many men are in his retinue?”

“25.”

“Then, you shall have 50. I will send thirty automated units and twenty men, in addition to a full battalion of the Amoian Guard to secure the Tower. We’re taking no chances. Have you any suspicion about the nature of his visit?”

“I cannot say for sure,” Lord Mink admitted, “but my gut feeling is that this is entirely a political visit, to reestablish the disrupted trade flows.”

“Are you going to be able to control your pet’s behavior when the Commander stays with you?”

“Of course,” Iason replied, though privately he felt far from confident on this point.

“He will be chained the duration of the Commander’s visit,” Jupiter ordered.

“As you wish,” the Blondie conceded, with a slight incline of his head.

“We are fortunate that Commander Khosi did not seem to take offense. That might have been disastrous, if he had reacted differently. We should proceed with Security enhancements immediately. I will be sending the automated units throughout the night. The organic units will arrive tomorrow.”

“Odi believes we should also coordinate with the Tanagura Police.”

“An excellent suggestion, please have him proceed with that immediately.”

“I will.”

Without further comment, Jupiter abruptly ended the transmission. Frowning, the Blondie turned to consider the mongrel, who was once again sitting with his head buried on his arms.

“What possessed you to say such a thing, Riki?” he scolded. “Don’t you know who Commander Khosi is?”

“I don’t care who he is, it’s obvious he wants to fuck you.”

Lord Mink rose, walking slowly toward his pet. “Commander Khosi is a very important dignitary who will be staying with us for the duration of the Trade Convention. I expect you to be on your best behavior while he is here, Riki. Look at me.”

“Expect what you like,” the mongrel replied, shrugging.

“I’m quite serious. Your behavior toward the Commander will be courteous and respectful, do you understand me?” Iason stopped in front of him, arms crossed on his chest.

Riki sighed loudly but made no reply.

“Answer me.”

“Yes, I understand you,” the mongrel replied irritably.

“You’re walking a *very* thin line, pet. Perhaps I put the cane away too soon. Shall I retrieve it again?”

Riki paled, shaking his head.

“No? Then I suggest you modify your attitude. A little respect would be in order just now.”

Riki was sorely tempted to reply to this, but managed to hold his tongue, though he avoided looking him directly in the eye.

At that moment, Katze finally returned to the penthouse. “Iason,” he said with a nod of respect toward the Blondie. He glanced at Riki but said nothing. Then he turned to Toma, who was standing near the

foyer, waiting to be summoned. "You're here. I apologize; I should have been here to make you welcome."

"No matter."

"I suppose I should show you around. Let's start with—"

"Katze," Lord Mink interrupted. "You can train Toma tomorrow. Right now we need to take care of your punishment."

Paling, Katze could do little more than nod. "Yes, Sir."

"You'll take the strap. Go get it."

"Yes, Sir," Katze murmured, relieved he had been spared another whipping with the MXV Emperor. He went to the special cabinet in the foyer where Iason kept a number of disciplinary instruments and retrieved the thick training strap. He knew the strap well and had taken more than a few strikes with it in his early days with the Blondie. The mere sight of it inspired a sense of dread and fear, and he realized, as Iason took it from him, that it had been selected for precisely that reason.

"I'll be administering the punishment exposed, so take off your pants, and put your palms on the dining room table."

Katze, mortified that he was about to be shamefully bared and soundly disciplined in the presence of the new attendant, hesitated.

"Did you not hear me?" Iason said sharply.

The eunuch's cheeks flushed nearly as red as his hair as he made his way over to the table. He slipped off his shoes and then stripped from the waist down, dutifully positioning himself as instructed.

"Katze, I left Riki in your charge today. I expected you to keep a tight rein on him. Instead, you allowed him to leave your presence without his chains. I don't need to review what happened after that."

"No, Sir. I'm sorry, Sir," the eunuch answered.

"You may well be sorry, indeed I should hope you are, but make no mistake: you are going to be *very* sorry by the time I'm finished with you," Iason warned. "Your conduct today was unacceptable. Let me very clear: you are fortunate that nothing happened to Riki, Katze."

"Yes, Sir."

"You'll take 50 strikes with this strap. *You* will count them." With that, the Blondie unleashed the strap against his thighs with a fearsome snap, eliciting a startled gasp from the eunuch.

“I told you to count the strikes,” Lord Mink scolded.

“One,” Katze whispered.

“Louder! I can’t hear you.”

“One!”

Sssnapppp!

“Two!”

Katze was furious, feeling keenly the injustice of being punished for something the mongrel had done. The strap stung like the blazes, but he struggled with all his might to take his punishment in silence. He pressed his palms hard into the table as though it would somehow lessen the pain, wincing and biting his lip each time the strap seared his flesh.

Having to count each strike out loud was pure torture. His voice betrayed his pain, even if he managed to keep from whimpering aloud otherwise.

Lord Mink gained some satisfaction from his gasps and his obvious discomfort, but this wasn’t enough. No, he wanted to hear him cry out openly. So he pushed the intensity level up another notch and put the weight of his body behind his arm, strapping him so hard that the sound alone was enough to make the eunuch jump.

Unable to maintain his composure, Katze finally answered each startling crack of the strap with an equally loud vocalization. At some point during the punishment session he began unintentionally arching his body toward the table in an attempt to escape the Blondie’s arm.

“How *dare* you move out of position!” Iason yelled. “*And I told you to keep count!*”

“Twenty-six!” Katze attempted to resume his stance but simply could not help himself: he thrust his groin forward with each acquaintance with the strap, without even meaning to. Even as a young attendant he had never taken more than a few hard strikes with the dreaded implement. Once Iason had found him sneaking a taste of Red Emperor, a very expensive wine and the Blondie’s favorite, and for that he had pushed him up against the wall and delivered perhaps fifteen stinging blows to his thighs, but even then, Katze had been allowed the dignity of keeping his pants on.

And he certainly had not been made to *count* the strikes.

Furious, the Blondie stepped forward and slammed him facedown onto the table. “Very well, if you cannot stay in position, I will *hold* you there,” he announced, keeping one hand firmly on the small of his back as he continued to administer his punishment, targeting the eunuch’s blistering ass for the remainder of the strikes.

To be strapped on the bare ass was considered the most humiliating punishment an attendant could endure. It was one thing to take a few strikes across the thighs or the back, or even—more commonly—on an outstretched hand, but quite another to be strapped on the rump. Only disobedient pets were disciplined in such a manner, attendants almost never, or if they were, rarely with other household members watching.

Katze was beyond mortified; he was humiliated to the extreme, in part because he was now weeping openly.

“Does this answer you?” Iason demanded. “If you *ever* fail in your duties again, Katze, make no mistake: I won’t hesitate to put you back in the T-stand and whip you until you pass out.”

Toma watched in disbelief, eyes wide. 50 strikes with a strap? Though he was no stranger to discipline, he had never witnessed anything like *this*. He regarded his new Master with a deep sense of awe and respect. Perhaps he would do well to watch his step in the Mink household.

“F-forty-eight!” Katze cried.

Ssssnapp!

The eunuch yelped loudly.

“Count it!” Lord Mink demanded.

“F-f-forty-nine!”

Odi and Tai watched the strapping from the kitchen, opening the door just a crack. Katze’s cries were heart-wrenching: although a strapping could hardly compare to a whipping with the MXV Emperor, it was nevertheless punishment, and it was evident to everyone that the eunuch was suffering.

Katze had taken forty-nine hard strikes with a thick strap on his bared skin. His ass was red and blistering, and the typically stoic man was uncharacteristically in tears.

Still breathing hard from exertion, Iason slowly pulled the strap over his ass in a teasing fashion. The eunuch was visibly trembling, wincing as the strap scraped over his raw flesh. His backside was throbbing, and the movement of the strap, however slight, was excruciating.

“I ought to give you fifty more,” Lord Mink whispered through clenched teeth, leaning close to him. “I’m being very lenient, letting you off with just a strapping.”

“Yes, Sir!” Katze cried, desperately hoping the Blondie would not make good his threat.

Iason moved closer so that he could whisper in his ear. “In fact, I’m not quite finished with you. I have a special rod I’m going to administer in private. You remember it, I think? That’s fair, wouldn’t you agree? Or would you prefer another fifty with the strap?”

“Please, Sir, no Sir,” Katze pleaded.

“Is that no to the strap, or no to the rod?”

“The s-strap, Sir.”

“I should force you to take the strap, just because you don’t want it. However, I’ll be lenient with you and give you the rod. When we’re finished here, you’ll go to your room and wait for me. Keep your pants off.”

“Yes, Sir!”

“One more. Count it!” Lord Mink hissed, just before bringing down the strap with one final, wickedly painful blow.

The eunuch offered up a tortured howl of despair. “Fifty,” he sobbed, his voice hoarse from crying out.

Iason straightened, tossing the strap onto the table. “Go wait for me in your room, like I told you.”

Katze slowly stood up, shakily retrieving his pants and shoes and exiting from the hall.

The Blondie went to the table by his favorite chair and opened its drawer, retrieving something from it. Then he turned to Toma, who looked nearly ready to faint after witnessing such a punishment. “I hope you’ve learned something about how I answer disobedience in my home, Toma. I spare no one who fails to meet my expectations. You would do well to remember this. I’ve heard you have a penchant

for gossip. Breathe one word of what goes on in this penthouse to anyone and *you'll* be bringing me the strap next time. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir," Toma agreed, nodding fearfully.

Without another word, Lord Mink turned on his heel, making to follow Katze.

"What are you going to do to him now?" Riki asked, as the Blondie was about to leave the great hall.

"That's not your concern, is it?"

The mongrel answered this with a sneeze.

Iason stopped in his tracks and regarded him for a moment. Riki appeared to be shivering. He remembered then that the mongrel had complained of being cold, and that he had worn his clothes home from Dana Burn while they were still damp. "Do you have something you're ready to say to me?" he prompted.

"Not that you want to hear," the mongrel replied saucily.

"You're going to be in those chains while the Commander is here. If you want some relief from them now, I suggest you humble yourself and say what you know I'm waiting to hear. Come, stop being so obstinate and get it over with."

"Fine," Riki replied grumpily.

"Yes? I'm waiting."

"I acknowledge that you are my Master and I am your pet."

"And?"

"And I promise to obey all your stupid commands from here to eternity."

Although it was not precisely the declaration Iason had hoped for, it was about what he expected from Riki and, he knew, probably all he could *realistically* hope for. Satisfied, he released him from his chains, much to Riki's great relief.

"Crap, I can hardly move," the mongrel groaned, stretching. "I feel like shit."

"Go put something warm on and then lie down on your bed. I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Yeah, all right," Riki agreed.

Iason waited until Riki had disappeared down the guest wing

before he continued on to Katze's room.



PUNISHING KATZE HAD AROUSED IASON. He was, admittedly, looking forward to making the eunuch suffer *intimately* for his failure to properly watch over Riki. He had “punished” Katze with sex on another occasion, and there was no question, in his mind, that the occasion warranted such a session in addition to the strapping.

Yes, he would thoroughly enjoy punishing Katze with his cock: he remembered well the man's pleasantly tight, surprisingly accommodating embrace, which could take the entire length of his fully erect organ when forced. The thought of penetrating him over and over without restraint was so exciting to him that already a stubborn erection was straining the integrity of his pants.

In truth, when it came to the bedroom, the Blondie *usually* took Riki in a gentle, controlled manner that was based on affection for him and concern for his limits. Knowing he was far too big for his pet's physiology, he demonstrated a fair measure of reserve in his coital pillage, even if it was not apparent to the mongrel, but he had no such compunctions when it came to Katze: the eunuch deserved punishment, and therefore he would hold back nothing. In fact, he considered it a *duty* to properly chastise him with the instrument of his choice, and he also knew that splitting Katze's ass open with his aching erection would be nothing short of exquisite.

Besides Raoul, Katze had been the Blondie's first real foray into sexual deviance, though he had never let the young man know about it. He had fantasized about the attendant countless times, and when Katze had been much younger, he had even watched him sleep, standing silently in his room for hours.

Though he had long since buried those desires to the point where they had been nearly forgotten, Katze's transgression had awaken old longings and memories. The strap had opened that door: Lord Mink had always enjoyed punishing Katze with it. At times he had even conjured up imaginary or exaggerated indiscretions, in order to give him a strapping. Other times the eunuch had legitimately provoked

him into using it, and Iason, no matter how angry, had almost always pleased himself after punishing him. The strap had become so intertwined with his sexuality that, without even realizing it, he had developed an appetite for discipline as part of his sexual agenda—a proclivity that his mongrel pet knew only too well.

He hadn't even thought about it when he chose the strap this time: he knew how much Katze disliked it, and he was so angry at him, he wanted to be sure he was adequately punished. Once the strapping was underway he began instinctively reacting to it himself, and now that he had promised Katze a private session to finish off their punishment, he had worked himself up into a state of almost debilitating arousal.

He stood outside Katze's room for a moment, savoring what was in store for him. Then he entered the room, the door humming closed behind him. Katze was waiting for him, as instructed. He had been unable to sit down on the bed and was simply standing in the middle of the room, still holding his pants and shoes.

Lord Mink turned and entered a special code into the door panel, which instantly erected a force field around the perimeter of the room.

"What did you just do?" Katze asked, eyeing the glowing blue force field in surprise.

"I've engaged a temporary barrier around us. No one can come into this room or go out. It's also quite soundproof. No one will hear us."

Katze made no reply, only staring back at him wide-eyed.

"Take off your shirt. I want you completely naked."

The eunuch obeyed with obvious reluctance, looking as though he expected the Blondie to change his mind at any moment. "Please, do we have to do this?"

"What, do you want the strap again, after all?"

"No, Sir."

"Then you'll take my rod, won't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Get on the bed, on your hands and knees, at the foot of the bed," Lord Mink ordered.

Katze slowly obeyed, frowning as he assumed the wanted position.

Lord Mink unfastened the special flap at the groin of his bodysuit and released his cock as he moved behind Katze, and then opened the vial of lubrication he had retrieved from the great hall. "You're lucky I've decided to grease myself up first," he remarked as he rubbed the oil over his rigid erection. "I'm not doing it for your sake, however, but for mine."

"Yes, Sir."

Iason took a moment to examine Katze's backside, pleased with his handiwork. The man had taken quite a strapping, and it showed. A punitive fuck would be just the thing to round off his punishment, and Iason could hardly wait to administer it. His cock throbbed and ached in his hand as he stroked himself in preparation. He brushed his fingers along Katze's punished flesh, eliciting a sharp gasp from him.

"Are you ready to take my rod again, Katze?" he asked tauntingly, bumping his cock teasingly against the eunuch's sphincter. "I seem to recall it was quite effective, last time, in securing your submission."

Katze opted not to answer, deciding the question did not truly demand a response. Iason's movements were torture against his sore ass, and he squirmed uncomfortably, wincing.

Iason smiled, delighted with his reaction. "By the time I'm finished with you, you'll never again even contemplate letting Riki out of your sight, when I entrust him to you."

"No, Sir, I won't, Sir," Katze agreed. "Oh! Ow!"

"Put your head down on the bed," the Blondie commanded. "You deserve what's coming, don't you agree?"

Katze swallowed hard, shaking head to toe. "Yes, Sir."

"You'll count, just like before. I'll penetrate you fifty times."

"Fifty? Please, Sir—"

"Yes, fifty, and then you'll *stay in position* until I'm finished with you. Is that understood?"

"Y-yes," Katze whispered.

With that, the Blondie impaled him completely with his cock, eliciting a long, tortured cry from the eunuch. "Count it!" he commanded.

“Oh, *fuck*! Oh, please, Iason!”

“I said, *count it*!”

“One! *One*! Oh!”

Iason remained inside him for a moment, enjoying Katze’s distressed reaction. Then he pulled out and entered him again with the same punishing force, pulling back on his hips and holding him firmly so as not to allow him the slightest relief.

Katze cried out again, clutching the bedspread in agony. “Oh, help me! Two!”

“You’re very lucky nothing happened to Riki,” Iason warned, as he withdrew. “If he had been harmed in *any* way, you would be at the bottom of Manatung Bay now.” With that, he thrust deep inside him again. He proceeded in this manner until he had forcefully entered the eunuch fifty times, just as promised.

Katze was sobbing by the time he finished.

“Don’t move until I tell you,” the Blondie commanded. He then began thrusting in a more relaxed fashion, with a different objective.

At this point, Iason was dreadfully aroused; indeed, it had been difficult for him to hold onto his seed for the duration of Katze’s punishment, but he had enjoyed listening to the eunuch’s suffering too much to cut his punishment short. In truth, it was only when he heard Katze’s anguished cries during this more intimate session together that he finally felt satisfied he had been adequately punished.

Now, however, he was enjoying a different sort of pleasure as his engorged cock slid in and out of the eunuch’s well-lubricated, tender passage. Though he had certainly opened Katze up, his grip was still pleasantly, delightfully restrictive. The eunuch continued to gasp, cry out, and moan in response to his slightest movement. He undulated and rocked against him without consciously meaning to, his body responding to the stimulation in a manner that was almost beyond his control. Whereas before he had been punishing the eunuch, now he was simply fucking him, and delighting in that congress, moving against him more quickly and with mounting excitement.

Having forcibly delayed his release for so long, Lord Mink was now overcome with tiny spasms of pleasure as he approached and then

backed away from his critical point, pleasure that hinted of the glory to come—a glory that, a few seconds later, did indeed manifest, flooding him with waves of such intense, sweet release that the Blondie, who usually climaxed quietly, gasped and groaned uncontrollably as his ejaculate exploded out of his cock.

When he was finished, he withdrew quickly and without fanfare, taking a moment, however, to compose himself and straighten his clothing before he spoke. “You will speak to no one about what has gone on in this room,” he warned.

“I won’t, Sir,” Katze agreed weakly, still in position.

“Then I consider the matter settled between us. You may do as you please for the remainder of the night. Do you require a physician?”

“No, Sir,” the eunuch answered. Though he was not entirely sure if this was the case, he could not imagine subjecting himself to further humiliation.

With a nod, Lord Mink then left the room.

6

Iason's Promise

RIKI HAD FALLEN ASLEEP by the time Lord Mink finally came into the room, carrying a tray of food.

"Pet?"

"Fuck," Riki grumbled, opening his eyes and sitting up in his bed. "I just had a horrible dream."

"I brought you something to eat." The Blondie set the tray down on his lap and then sat down next to him on the bed.

The mongrel eyed the lamb stew hungrily. He was still angry over being punished and felt like refusing to eat, simply out of protest. The food, however, looked delicious, and he was admittedly ready for a good meal.

"You must be hungry," Iason prompted.

Riki shrugged.

"Eat, pet. I won't tolerate another one of your hunger strikes. You seem rather out of sorts and I can't have you getting ill."

"*Of course* I'm out of sorts. You just caned the shit out of me," Riki replied bitterly.

"We've been over this already. I did what I had to do. I know you're still hurting, but you deserved it for running away. Now, eat, or I'll turn you over my knee and warm you up again."

Sighing, the mongrel picked up his spoon with exaggerated reluctance and began to eat. "Aren't you eating?" he asked.

"I am not hungry."

"How is it you're even alive? You never eat."

The Blondie made no reply, watching him eat for a few minutes.

"Riki?"

"Yeah?"

"Why did you run away?" Iason asked, his voice quivering with emotion.

"I already told you: I wanted my freedom. I wasn't bred to be a pet, you know. I've made my position clear on that point from the very beginning."

"Is it really so terrible, being my pet?"

"This isn't about *you*," Riki answered. "I would feel the same way with anyone who claimed to be my Master."

The Blondie regarded him sadly. "Perhaps I was mistaken," he said softly, "but I thought you had come to some sort of acceptance about all this. You told me you belonged with me. In fact, there were times when you professed having certain feelings for me—even love. Was none of that true?"

"I don't know."

"I see."

Riki could not remember ever seeing Iason so downcast. Though part of him wanted to say something to reassure him, another part resisted. He deeply resented how harshly the Blondie had punished him. He felt wretched: his entire backside was throbbing and burning. "I don't see how you can care for me the way you say you do, when you punish me like you just did."

Lord Mink sighed. "Why must we have the same conversations, over and over? You are punished because you are disobedient. My feelings for you must not cloud my judgment and duties as your Master. Though I may want to be lenient with you, at times, I cannot: inappropriate conduct and defiance must be answered, and it falls on me to administer that punishment. Today I had to be very severe on you because you ran away. I don't see how you can be at all surprised by the severity of the punishment. You knew, when you ran away, that such a session would be in store for you, if you were caught. Yet you chose to proceed with your defiance anyway."

The mongrel looked away, fidgeting. He could hardly argue with Iason on this last point: he *had* known that he would be in for it, if his

attempt to run away failed.

"I did not enjoy punishing you today, Riki," the Blondie continued.

"Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"I do confess that, at times, I have experienced some degree of arousal after punishing you," Iason admitted, "but that was not the case today."

"Hmmm. Well, I couldn't help but notice the big boner you got punishing Katze," Riki remarked.

Lord Mink made no answer, lowering his gaze.

"At least you're not denying it. Why did you follow him to his room afterwards?"

"I told you before, that is not your concern."

"Well, I hope you don't want sex now. My ass is fucking killing me," the mongrel announced.

"If I want sex, we'll have sex," Iason replied. "However, at present I am not in the mood."

"Well, there's a first," Riki remarked wryly. "You *always* want sex."

"Riki," the Blondie said, after a moment, "You must be on your *best* behavior during the Commander's visit. No matter what he does or says, you must maintain some semblance of respect for him."

"Gee, I wonder what made you think of *him*, suddenly," the mongrel answered, rolling his eyes. "You're going to pair with him, aren't you?"

"Would it upset you, if I did?"

"No," Riki said quickly. "Why should I care?"

Lord Mink felt disappointed in his answer, having hoped he might express some measure of jealousy over such a proposed union. This reminded him of another situation, one that was weighing heavily on his mind. "Riki...I found something that belongs to you."

"Hmmm?"

"I found...this." Iason reached into his pocket and pulled out the pendant, showing it to him.

Riki's eyes widened as he realized what he held. "Oh. I'm glad you found that."

The Blondie frowned. "Does it mean that much to you?"

"No—well, yes. I need it. It's not what you think."

"No? You...still have feelings for Guy, is that right?"

Riki swallowed. "I do still have feelings for him," he admitted. "But that's not why I want the pendant."

"I see."

Riki couldn't help but soften when he saw Iason's expression. The Blondie seemed so sad; he found, despite everything that had happened that day, that he couldn't stand to see him looking so miserable. It was clear that Iason thought the pendant was some sort of love token Guy had given him. Suddenly, he just wanted to tell him the truth, at least about the pendant.

"I have to tell you something, Iason."

Lord Mink waited, appearing far calmer than he felt. His heart was beating a cadence faster as he braced himself for a confession of love that he very much did not want to hear. But at the same time, he simply had to know the truth about his pet's feelings. "Out with it, then."

"Something happened today at Dana Burn. Something terrible."

"Yes? I'm listening."

"I...when I was at Dana Burn," the mongrel began, and then stopped. He felt his throat constrict, as if the words he was about to say had amassed there, refusing to proceed. He wanted to tell Iason, but he dreaded saying the words. And he worried, too, about what sort of punishment the Blondie might have for him after he confessed his transgression.

"When you were at Dana Burn," Lord Mink prompted gently. "What happened there, my pet?"

"The pendant," Riki said, his voice barely above a whisper, "doesn't belong to me."

"No?" Lord Mink's brow furrowed.

"It was Kei's."

At first, Lord Mink could not quite place Kei. Then he remembered that he was the mongrel attempting to hedge into Katze's market, the one who hadn't been there the day Riki visited Bison—the one who, if he recalled correctly, was Guy's new pairing partner. He waited anxiously for him to continue, almost certain that Riki would confess

to stealing the pendant out of jealousy over Kei's relationship with Guy.

"Then, how did you acquire it?"

"I took it from him. After...." Riki stopped again, wanting to continue but at the same time feeling unable to utter the words.

"After what?"

"After I...after I *killed him*."

Having finally admitted the truth, Riki felt wondrously relieved. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Iason.

The Blondie was actually completely surprised with this confession. It wasn't at all what he had expected. In the space of a few words, his fear that Riki had stolen the pendant was now replaced with the revelation that his pet had murdered Kei.

"You killed him?" Iason repeated, stunned. When he thought of his pet misbehaving, he imagined him engaging in more marginal, negligible transgressions: tossing objects from the balcony and other similar grievances—mischief that was trivial, almost absurd. But murder?

And yet...he understood only too well the passion that could drive someone to take another life.

"Yes."

"Explain," Iason replied breathlessly. "Was it because you were jealous?"

Riki blinked, perplexed by this accusation. "Of course not. Why would I be jealous of Kei?"

"I meant, of his relationship to your old partner, Guy."

"No, nothing like that. He had come for the reward you put out. I don't know how he found me, but he did. He had a knife and threatened to cut up my face. The next thing I knew, he was on the ground after I'd shot him with my laser." Riki squinted his eyes shut, trying to block out the memory of Kei's face as the young man died. "It was...*horrible*. All that blood...and the way he begged me to hold his hand at the end."

"Oh pet." Iason leaned forward and brushed the hair back from his forehead soothingly. He knew what Riki was feeling, all too well. He still remembered with horrifying clarity the night he had taken Anori

Khosi's life. Although at the time he had been too angry to feel anything but justified in killing the ambassador, over the years he had revisited the episode many times in his thoughts, deeply regretting his rashness and cruelty in murdering the young Alphazanian, whose only crime had been catering to Raoul Am's insatiable sexual appetite. With the arrival of his brother Voshka now imminent, Iason had been thinking about Anori more than usual, so he understood perfectly the mongrel's private torment.

He longed to share his own secret and unburden his heart, but he knew that he could not; much as he loved Riki, he did not trust him to keep such an important matter in strict confidence. Should the Commander discover what had truly happened to his brother, Iason would not be the only one in danger. Amoi could theoretically become a pawn in the general's military aspirations, and it was not completely inconceivable that Voshka would exact revenge for Anori's death on all of Amoi.

Although Lord Mink felt fairly confident that Jupiter could prevent such an incursion, any sort of rift with their most important trading partner would be deeply unsettling, generating negative repercussions in all Sectors. Since the Commander's overthrow of the Senate on Alpha Zen, trade had slowed nearly to a halt. The entire Fourth Sector had been declared unstable. With imports and exports effectively frozen, already this development had caused tremendous market uncertainties, driving up prices ridiculously on certain items and hurling the entire black market into chaos. Slum riots were not out of the question, if the situation continued, and the Blondie was not completely sure how Jupiter would handle another insurrection.

At the very least, things could get very messy.

So for a number of reasons, Iason kept his secret to himself.

"Is that why you went into the ocean, to clean off the blood?" he asked.

"No, to get rid of the body." Riki closed his eyes, remembering the cold seawater that had seeped almost into his very bones, chilling him to the core, and how Kei's corpse seemed to refuse to be carried away by the waves.

Lord Mink nodded, the scene finally beginning to make sense. He

remembered how Riki had been naked; this had puzzled him exceedingly at the time, but now he understood that it had been necessary to remove his wet clothes because of the cold. "But why did you take the pendant?"

"So I could send it to Guy, with...some sort of compensation."

Now the Blondie became alarmed. "You don't mean to confess this to him?"

"Of course I will, at some point. He deserves to know."

"No, Riki. I cannot let you do that."

"But I have to. You don't understand."

"I told you *no*, pet."

"But...it's the mongrel way!"

"That may be the case," Iason replied levelly, "but I am not a mongrel, and you are no longer living in Ceres. We'll handle matters my way. I have no problem with your anonymously providing compensation for this mongrel's death, but you'll not identify your hand in it. If you do, your life could be in danger. I believe blood-vengeance is sometimes demanded, or am I mistaken?"

"I don't think Guy would ask for it."

"I'm not going to let your safety be decided by the uncertainty of his whims," Lord Mink replied sternly. "You'll mind me on this, Riki. Is that understood?"

Refusing to answer, the mongrel looked away.

Iason took hold of his chin, turning his head back to face him. "*Is that understood, pet?*" he demanded.

"Yes, it's fucking understood." Bitter that he now had to hide his part in Kei's death, Riki pouted. It went against his entire upbringing, and he resented Iason's interference in the matter.

"So you killed this mongrel because he threatened you, and not for any other reason?"

"He had a name, you know," Riki snapped, offended at Iason's referring to Kei as '*this mongrel*'.

"Very well; are you saying you only killed *Kei* to protect yourself, not because you were jealous?"

"Hell no, I wasn't jealous of Kei, he was a total dickhead."

The Blondie couldn't help but smile.

"What are you smiling about? Kei's dead and you look almost happy about it."

"I am not happy," Lord Mink replied, "but I must admit I am relieved, on a number of counts. Fortunately, he was only a mongrel."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Riki shot back, angrily. "Are you saying his life doesn't count for anything because he's '*only a mongrel*'?"

"You misunderstand me, pet. I merely mean that, as a mongrel, his death entails no further legal complications. If he had been a citizen or an Elite, it would have been a very different matter."

"I guess that's because we mongrels are just worthless vulgar trash," Riki retorted bitterly.

"Now, pet," Iason chided. "You know that's not how I think of you."

"But that's what you think of *other* mongrels, isn't it? Admit it!"

The Blondie thought for a moment, trying to decide how to answer. He didn't want to hurt his pet, but it was hard to feel anything but contempt for mongrels. His entire upbringing and training at the Academy had drilled such attitudes into him, and these were not easily discarded. Although he had come to develop a certain respect for Riki, those feelings did not extend generally to the population of non-citizens that inhabited Ceres. Slum rats were filthy, amoral inebriates that weren't even worth a second thought. He'd even felt such contempt for Riki initially...at least until he had beheld his naked body.

"You don't have to say anything. I can see it in your eyes. I remember that look."

"I'll concede I probably feel the same contempt for mongrels generally that you feel for Elites," Lord Mink replied, finally. "Of course, my feelings for *you* are altogether quite different."

Riki couldn't help but admire his Master's reply, finding it clever. "So, what is my punishment?"

"Your punishment?"

"For...for what I did. For killing Kei."

"Your own thoughts will be punishment enough," the Blondie answered after a pause.

Riki was stunned. He'd simply *assumed* he was in for another monstrous discipline session for his transgression. He'd been severely punished for far less. Somehow he felt he deserved a formal punishment, for his *own* peace of mind. At the same time, of course, he had dreaded telling Iason for precisely that reason, knowing full well what sort of torture the Blondie could dream up.

"What is it, pet? You look upset."

"It doesn't seem right. I should be punished for what I did."

"Are you saying you *want* to be punished, Riki?"

"No," the mongrel replied quickly. "It's not that I *want* it. It just seems like, for what I did...I guess I thought you'd react a lot differently."

"When I punish you, Riki, like I did today, it is because you do not obey me. What happened with this mongrel—*Kei*," he corrected, quickly, "had nothing to do with me."

"But won't this cause you some sort of trouble?"

Iason regarded him with pity, considering how best to tell him the truth of the matter without unduly upsetting him. "I know you don't want to hear this, but, as a non-citizen, Kei's death is of no consequence: I mean as far as the law is concerned, or Jupiter."

"Oh." Hurt by this revelation, Riki fell silent. Kei's death was of no consequence? It seemed, to him, cruelly unjust. He could not help but think about how Guy would react once he found out what had happened. Kei's death would certainly be of some consequence to *him*, at least. He was hurt not only by this complete lack of legal recognition for the value of a mongrel life—something which he should have guessed, but had never been directly confronted with—and also by Iason's impassivity. He seemed completely unaffected by his confession, infuriatingly indifferent to Kei's death.

Iason, seeing that he had finished eating, took his tray and put it aside. "Now, pet, I'm afraid you're not going to like this," he warned, as he pulled a small, thin can of Accelerator from his pocket.

Riki shook his head. "No. Please, no."

"I must insist. But this will help you, Riki. By tomorrow you'll be feeling much better. Now, turn over."

Though he wanted to resist, the mongrel knew it was futile. He

reluctantly submitted, wincing when Iason pulled his pajama bottoms down.

"You're being very good," Lord Mink praised. "Don't move: this will only take a few seconds."

When Riki felt the searing pain on his backside, he nearly passed out from the pain. He screamed his agony but, to the Blondie's great surprise, remained obediently positioned as the Accelerator was applied to his tender, bruised flesh.

"I'm very proud of you," Iason continued, setting the can aside. "If only you would be this obedient all the time."

"Fuck," the mongrel whispered, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"There, there. It's been a very long day, but your punishment is over now," the Blondie soothed, stroking his hair.

"That feels nice," Riki sniffed.

"Try to get some sleep now, pet. Tomorrow will be a better day."



"IT SMELLS SO GOOD," KAHLAN WHINED, as the aroma of the Aristian Chocolate Cake filled Omaki's home. He and Ru were alone in the kitchen, sitting at the table while the cake was baking.

Ru smiled proudly. "I hope it tastes good, too."

"Of course it will. *You* made it. I'm just bummed we have to wait until tomorrow to eat it."

"You got to lick the bowl," Ru pointed out.

Kahlan grinned. "Yeah. That was good, too. Just like my mother used to make." As soon as he said the words, his expression changed, a shadow creeping into his features.

"I've noticed that you rarely speak about your family," Ru prompted.

Kahlan grew despondent, staring down at the table. "That's because they're all dead."

"All?"

Kahlan nodded. "They were all...slaughtered."

"Sweet Astrajia," Ru whispered. "I'm so sorry, Kahlan. I can't imagine what that must be like for you."

Kahlan looked up, his eyes shining with tears. For a long moment their gazes locked, inaugurating a new level of intimacy between them. He nodded, unable to respond, his throat constricting. A single tear spilled over and traced a path of sorrow down his face. He wiped it away, angrily.

“Hey,” Ru said, reaching out to put his hand on his knee. “It’s all right to cry. Let it out. Maybe it will help.”

These words seemed to release a floodgate that had held Kahlan’s emotions locked within him for over two years. He finally acknowledged his horror of what had happened that day, when his father, mother, sisters and brothers had all been taken from him in the space of a few minutes. Tears now streaming down his face, Kahlan sobbed as Ru held him, comforting him.



“YOU’RE AWAKE.”

Yui drifted back into consciousness, slowly becoming aware of his Master’s presence when the Blondie gently brushed the hair back from his face.

“Is it over?”

“Yes. Heiku says everything went well.”

“Ohhh,” Yui groaned, overwhelmed by the horrific pain in his groin.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little,” he answered, wincing.

“Nurse!” Raoul bellowed.

The nurse came rushing in, frowning when she saw Lord Am. It was the Blondie who had made such a nuisance of himself during the attendant’s surgery, interrupting her work every few minutes with various demands.

“He’s in pain,” Raoul announced, almost accusingly.

“We couldn’t give him anything until he regained consciousness,” she replied defensively.

“Give him something now, then.”

The nurse nodded, feeling rather put off by the Blondie’s

domineering manner. But then, he *was* a Blondie, and an infamously moody one at that. Blondies were always difficult to deal with at the hospital. They were accustomed to being in control, but a hospital was a place where they had very little control over what went on.

She activated Yui's implanted dispenser with a flip of a switch. It would administer analgesics on a regular basis, which would help tremendously with the pain, though even this would have little effect once Yui began Acceleration. His first treatment was scheduled for later that day, and the nurse desperately hoped the great Blondie would go home before that happened. She had a feeling Lord Am would be more difficult to deal with than the patient.

Privately she found it very odd that the Blondie was having his attendant undergo genital restoration. She didn't understand it, but she knew better than to ask questions. Heiku Quiahtenon, the Head of Reconstruction, had drilled that much into her, at least.

Yui moaned, his eyes half-closed, but this time for altogether different reasons. The pain medication worked immediately, not only ameliorating his pain, but also filling his body with a pleasurable, tingling warmth.

"Feeling better?" she asked, smiling knowingly.

"Mmmm...yes!"

"Leave us," Lord Am said brusquely.

The nurse gave him a slight bow as she left, biting her tongue with great difficulty and desperately wishing she was in a position to censure him for his rudeness. But she was not; after all, he was a Blondie, and in the social ladder she was positioned well beneath him.

"How long have I been asleep? Since the surgery?"

"Don't you remember waking up yesterday?"

"No," Yui answered, puzzled. "I don't remember anything. Then the surgery was yesterday?"

"Yes. You've been drifting in and out of consciousness since then."

Now Yui, more fully awake, suddenly felt anxious to see his new body. He lifted the sheet, peering under it. "I see a bulge," he announced eagerly.

"Let me see." Lord Am took the sheet and simply pulled it down so that Yui's body was on full display and then lifted his night shirt to

examine the bandaged area.

“When can we take the bandage off?” Yui asked.

“Whenever Heiku allows it. The nurse will most likely change it later. But you may not like what you see.”

“Why not?”

“Because it will take awhile before you’re fully healed.”

“Did you remember to feed Pixie?”

“Pixie?” Raoul blinked.

“The kitten!”

“Oh. I haven’t been home.”

“You mean you’ve been here since yesterday?” Yui was completely stunned that his Master had stayed by him all night.

“Yes. I wanted to be sure there were no...complications.”

“You have to go home and feed him,” Yui pleaded. “He’ll go crazy. He’s probably already torn the place apart.”

“If he did, I’ll put him in a box and give him away to the first person I see,” the Blondie replied grumpily.

“You wouldn’t do that! He’s just a sweet little kitten who’s all hungry and mad.”

“Hmmm. Well, he’s your responsibility, so if he’s made a mess, I’ll have to punish you, when you’re healed.”

Yui giggled at this threat, thrilled with the glimmer in his Master’s eyes. He knew that future “punishment” could be a lot more interesting once he was functioning properly.

“You won’t find it so amusing when I have you over my knee,” Raoul warned, though he was unable to suppress a smile. He couldn’t wait to get Yui home again and was anxious for the day when he could explore him more fully. Most of all, he was looking forward to hearing him climax for the first time.

“Please. Go home and feed him. And don’t tell me you’ve been up all night?”

Raoul leaned forward, feigning a stern expression. “Are you dictating my agenda, Yui?”

“No, Master, of course not,” Yui answered quickly before he realized Lord Am was only teasing.

“I will go home later today, after your first treatment. I want to be

with you for that.”

Yui was so happy, he didn't even care about the Acceleration treatment that was coming. He was flattered that his Master had stayed at the hospital the entire night. “You must be tired.”

Raoul shrugged. “Perhaps a little.” He covered him again with the sheet and then took hold of his hand.

“Thank you for this.” Yui's voice quivered as he blinked back tears of gratitude.

The Blondie leaned forward to whisper in his ear, “We'll see if you're still so thankful when I ravish you night after night.”

“But you already do *that*,” Yui shot back teasingly.

“Naughty pet. Don't get cheeky with me.”

Pet? Yui blinked again, opening and closing his mouth as he struggled to find his voice.

“You...you...Master, you just called me...*pet*.”

Raoul smiled. “That's because you've become my pet, even if it's just our little secret. My very special, secret pet.”

Yui had always fantasized about what it would be like to be a pet, to be his Master's pampered plaything, performing for him on command. Even if he was only a “secret pet,” he was thrilled that Lord Am thought of him as such.

“Do you like it when I call you that?”

Yui nodded, feeling too emotional to speak.

“I'm not just toying with you. When we return home and you're well, I want you to perform for me just as any pet would.”

“Will I wear special clothes?” Yui whispered back excitedly.

Raoul laughed softly. “Indeed you will. You know I like dressing up my pets...and then undressing them.” He stared down fondly at the attendant. “What do you think of that?”

“I've always wondered how it would feel to be a pet and to wear such...revealing clothing. And sometimes even chains. Will I wear a collar?”

“Does that excite you?” the Blondie asked. “Then, perhaps I'll chain you up in the hall.”

“Like Sir Iason's wild mongrel.”

“Precisely; only, you won't be as naughty as he is. Or if you are...I'll

really have to punish you.”

Thrilled with his Master’s playfulness, Yui gazed up at him coyly. “How will you punish me?”

“I’ll tie you facedown to the bed, spread-eagled. Then I’ll take my belt off and discipline you with it. After that I’ll straddle you and take you repeatedly.” Raoul paused, finding the conversation exceptionally arousing. He reached down to adjust himself, the movement drawing Yui’s notice.

“Are you becoming aroused, Master?”

“Yes, my Yui-pet. You’ve quite stimulated me. I shall have to relieve myself before I drive home.”

“I can do that now,” Yui offered.

“No,” Lord Am replied, though a bit hesitantly. “No; you’re recovering.”

“I want to. I can relieve you with my hand. Close the door, Master.”

Raoul studied him for a moment, a slight, quivering smile tugging at his lips. “Well,” he answered in a low voice, “if you’re quite sure?”

Yui nodded. “I am. Please let me do it.”

The Blondie then rose and closed the door to the room, locking it as well. His cock had gone completely rigid at the attendant’s proposition, but he wasn’t taking any chances at someone walking in at an inopportune moment. He quickly returned to the bedside and unfastened his trousers, releasing his erection and offering himself to the watching attendant.

A soft hiss of pleasure escaped him when Yui’s warm fingers encircled his ready shaft. Having skipped his evening and morning routines, he was more aroused than usual, nearly bursting from the slightest touch.

“Yui,” he whispered. “You’re a good pet.”

Yui smiled broadly at this, thrilled with his Master’s new appellation. He slowly stroked the twitching organ, enjoying Raoul’s gasps and sighs and the look of sheer pleasure on his face.

“Does that feel good?”

“Oh, yes. I won’t last long this time.”

“Then move closer. Let me roll onto my side and you can climax

into my mouth.”

Lord Am only made the slightest pretense at hesitation, assisting him with the new position even as he spoke. “Only if you’re sure.”

Too impatient and excited to even wait for a confirmation, the Blondie eagerly brushed his cock up against Yui’s lips, moaning when the attendant began suckling him.

“Ahhh! Your mouth feels divinely hot...and *wet*. That’s it, suck me, Yui! Mmmm...*very* nice! What a pretty face you have, such lovely, soft hair! You’re pretty as a girl—prettier than any female pet. Almost as pretty as Iason! I adore the shape of your mouth: those plump, pouting lips, *perfect* for fellatio. I always thought so, even years ago when you first came to me. I longed to see you just like this: with your mouth clamped over my cock. Stay there, just on the tip—I like that. You’re a very sexy, provocative boy. Perhaps I’ll make you wear lip stain sometime. You look so enticing when you suck me. Ohhh, and it *feels* good, too! *So* good! I can’t wait to fuck you again; I love squeezing inside that delightfully tight ass of yours. Jupiter help me, I do love splitting you open! I’m going to come soon. Don’t move, I want to come on your lips first, and then all over your face. Ahhhhh! I’m about to climax...in fact, here it is: oh, *yessss*! Lick it up, Yui, that’s it! Drink me! Ohhh that’s *divine*! Pretty, *pretty* boy!”

The Blondie had already erupted, shooting semen onto the young man’s lips and chin, and now he pumped himself to expel every last drop of ejaculate, groaning and fussing the entire time.

“Oh, *yesss*, my pet,” he whispered, still riding his pleasure. “You like the taste of me, don’t you? I like that! You’re *magnificent*.”

Falling silent for a few seconds, the Blondie simply watched him through half-closed eyes, still breathing hard and erratically.

“I’m afraid I’ve made quite a mess,” he said apologetically, after a moment. He retrieved one of his handkerchiefs and gently wiped off Yui’s face with it. “I confess I rather enjoy seeing my sex splattered all over your face, but the nurse will wonder about it, if she sees you like this, won’t she?”

“Yes, she will,” Yui agreed. “Did you enjoy that, Master?”

Lord Am laughed softly. “Don’t tell me you couldn’t tell what my view was? What a silly question.”

"It *did* sound as though you liked it," Yui admitted, rolling onto his back.

"Of course I did. I always do."

Yui nodded, trying to smile. Though, of course, he had enjoyed listening to his Master's remarks as he had pleased him, one comment he had not particularly cared for:

You're pretty as a girl—prettier than any female pet. Almost as pretty as Iason!

Though he tried not to think of it, he couldn't help but feel jealous at the comparison with the Blondie. *Almost* as pretty as Iason, Raoul had said. Yui felt hurt, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it. His Master couldn't help how he felt about his former lover, and he knew he should simply let it go. But he couldn't, and already the words were eating away at him.

"You look tired. I shouldn't have exerted you," Raoul remarked, suddenly concerned.

Yui shook his head. "I wanted to. Why don't you go home now and feed Pixie while I take a nap? Then maybe *you* should take a nap."

Lord Am nodded, suddenly feeling exhausted. "I'll go home for a spell. Then I'll come back later, before your treatment."

"Pixie's food is in the pantry."

Raoul leaned down and kissed his forehead. "You sleep now."

"Yes, Master," Yui replied, his eyes fluttering shut. He drifted off to sleep almost instantly, a smile still on his lips.



YOUSI OPENED HIS EYES, STARTLED to find Aki standing next to him, pointing his laser at his face. "I'm going to squirt you if you don't get up," he warned.

"You'd make a good alarm clock," Yousi answered, yawning. "I should take you home with me, and then I'd never oversleep again."

"I can't go with you and be your alarm clock," Aki replied, solemnly. "I'm going to live with Sir Iason soon."

"Truly?" Yousi sat up, perplexed. "Why?"

Aki sighed, lowering his gun and sitting down on the bed

dejectedly. "Because Jupiter won't let me stay with my Master anymore. She says I'm too young to be his pet."

Yousi nodded. "You are young. You're just a little boy."

"I'm not a little boy!" Aki cried fiercely. "I'm going to be *nine* in two days!"

"My apologies," Yousi smiled. "You're quite right. Nine is a very important year."

Aki relaxed, smiling. "It is?"

"Oh yes. I remember when I was nine. I...." Suddenly Yousi fell silent. He *remembered* when he was nine! He could remember his childhood, something that had always eluded him before. Now, it was all there, his days at the Academy, his childhood games and concerns.

"When you were nine, *what*?" Aki yelled impatiently.

"Aki," Omaki scolded from the doorway, where he now stood. "Didn't I tell you not to bother Sir Yousi?"

"But he's telling me all about being nine!"

Lord Ghan took one look at Yousi and knew something was up. "Aki, mind me. Go to your room until I come to you."

"No!" Aki replied defiantly.

"Someone wants a spanking," the Blondie warned. "Aki, go to your room, or I'll turn you over my knee right here."

Sighing, Aki obeyed with great reluctance, feeling he was being deprived of some critical information about the importance of being nine. As he passed Omaki he aimed his gun at him, threatening to squirt him.

"Don't you dare," Omaki warned.

For a moment, the bold Commander considered defying his Master and giving him a good squirt. But, in the interest of maintaining the integrity of his bottom, he opted to abort this demonstration of insubordination, choosing instead the wise, though less exciting, path of submission.

The Blondie smiled as the boy passed him, suddenly filled with an urge to pick him up and hold him tight.

"I am sorry he woke you," he remarked, turning back to Yousi.

Yousi shook his head. "I've been sleeping far too long. It seems all I do is sleep these days."

Omaki nodded. "It probably has something to do with the return of your memories. You need more rest than usual."

"I don't understand what's happening to me."

Lord Ghan shook his head. "I don't either, old friend. But, if there's anything I can do...."

"We were punished. You and I, in the...Headmaster's chambers at the Academy."

Omaki laughed. "Many times, Yousi. You remember this now?"

Yousi nodded. "And if I recall correctly, those pranks we played were all *your* idea."

Lord Ghan grinned. "It seems you have a selective memory. I assure you, you came up with plenty very good pranks yourself."

"Did I?"

"Oh yes. My favorite was when you put invisible ink with temperature-triggered colorant manifestation in all the soap dispensers, right before Examinations. Everyone had to take the exam with red hands. And then, when the Headmaster called *us* down, you said, 'Well, at least I wasn't caught red-handed.'"

Yousi laughed at this, a loud, bright laugh that caught Omaki off-guard. He sounded exactly as he once did, and the gleam in his eyes gave him a look of decided intelligence. It was truly remarkable, what was happening to the Blondie.

Lord Xuuju was returning.



AS SOON AS RAOUL ENTERED HIS SUITE, he was confronted by Pixie, who sat at his feet and mewed up at him, angrily.

"You," Lord Am answered, grumpily. He took one look at the apartment and, seeing how the kitten had managed to knock over everything in his power, grew angry. "Naughty Pixel," he scolded, having already forgotten the kitten's name.

Pixie mewed back defiantly. He was hungry.

"I suppose I have to feed you," Raoul muttered. "But I should really just put you in a box and punish you. You made a mess."

As he made definite movements toward the kitchen, the kitten

changed his tactics, growing exceedingly affectionate. He began rubbing up against his leg as the Blondie put food in his dish. The water dish had been turned upside down in protest of its emptiness, and Raoul had to smile a little at this. He was also amused that Yui had predicted the kitten's behavior, something he would never have even considered.

He was standing there, watching Pixie eat, when the door chime rang.

"Now what?" Lord Am went back to the foyer and flipped on his viewer.

It was Megala Chi.

Sighing, he opened the door. What did Megala want now?

"Sorry to disturb you, Raoul," Megala smiled. "I know you've just returned from...someplace. But I was concerned because I heard a lot of, um, strange noises coming from your suite last night. Crashes and such."

"Yes," Raoul sighed. "We have a kitten."

"Ah!" Megala peeked around him, and apprehending the state of disarray in the Blondie's typically immaculate great hall, raised his eyebrows with surprise.

"My, my. Yui has some work cut out for him."

"Yui is not here presently," Raoul replied, and then immediately regretted supplying this information.

"Oh?" Megala waited, hoping for more details, but these were not forthcoming. "Would you like me to send Nomi to you?"

"I appreciate the offer, but it's not necessary. I'll simply call housekeeping."

"If it suits you. So when will Yui be returning to you? I assume he must be...on an errand?"

"Not exactly," Lord Am replied, his voice now a bit clipped.

Sensing the Blondie's reluctance to offer anything further on this point, Megala sighed, disappointed. He desperately wanted to know what was going on between Raoul and Yui. There had been numerous occasions recently when he felt *certain* that activities of a sexual nature were taking place next door. When he sat at his kitchen table, which was right next to Lord Am's bedroom, he had, of late, heard

many suspicious sounds.

Megala had, in fact, designed the Eos Tower especially with Raoul in mind—or at least, with his own weakness for Raoul in mind. He had deliberately ensured, that his own suite was situated directly next to Lord Am's, and that the walls between his kitchen and Raoul's bedroom were especially thin, allowing him to enjoy the erotic luxury of listening to the great Blondie masturbating. He had even installed a peephole which, at first, had brought him hours of glorious viewing pleasure: but then, much to his dismay, Raoul had rearranged his room, placing something in front of the peephole and thus blocking his view.

And while Megala still enjoyed listening to the sound of Raoul climaxing, he was much less enthusiastic about the recent addition of a *second* voice to the performance, one that sounded suspiciously like Yui, his attendant.

The most disturbing thing about Lord Am's new perversion—if his hunch regarding Yui was correct—was that he did not seem to be the only one indulging in such behavior. Megala was equally convinced, having just returned from his villa, that Xian and Juthian were similarly engaged in inappropriate congress.

There had been all manner of talk about Omaki Ghan and his two pets, the little boy and the Xeronian, although Omaki did not particularly make his indiscretions a secret. And, of course, everyone knew about Iason and his mongrel pet.

Megala was beginning to wonder if all the Blondies were becoming corrupt, and he wondered how much Jupiter knew about what went on among them.

"Is there something else I can help you with?" Raoul asked, politely, trying to hide his irritation. He knew Megala quite well and could tell when the Blondie was trying to fish for information. "I'd invite you in for tea, but I'm quite tired. I need to rest."

Megala brightened a little at this, happy that Raoul had at least made some pretense of courtesy. "No, no: forgive me. I'll not disturb you any further." With a slight nod, he left, pondering the Blondie's evasive replies. He was now convinced that his suspicions regarding Yui were, indeed, right on the mark.



"THIS IS CREEPY. THEY'RE JUST STANDING there," Askel whispered.

"What else are they supposed to do? They're machines."

"Well, can't we turn the holographic projections on? So they at least look Amoian?"

"Good idea," Freyn conceded. He stood in front of one unit, a bit uncertain which button to press.

"You: transform into Amoian form," he commanded, finally.

The unit obeyed, projecting an image of a young, attractive, extremely muscular bodyguard.

Askel grinned. "Much better."

"All of you: transform in the same manner," Freyn commanded.

The units all obeyed, transforming into the same young bodyguard.

"That's even more creepy," Askel whispered. "They're all exactly the same."

"All of you: transform into unique forms," Freyn tried.

The units complied, this time choosing bizarre, 3-dimensional shapes, descending globules of plasma, or rotating rings around pulsating orbs.

Askel giggled. "You *did* say unique forms."

Freyn sighed. "All units: transform into different male *Amoians*."

"*Attractive* males," Askel added.

Immediately, the units transformed again, this time choosing spectacularly handsome masculine forms, all of them completely naked and some rather frighteningly endowed.

"Perfect," Askel announced, grinning.

Freyn rolled his eyes. "All units: retain form *with* appropriate bodyguard attire or amour."

Finally, the units appeared as a retinue of soldiers, all stunningly handsome and well armed, in shiny, elaborate armor.

"They're beautiful. But they're *really* stupid," Askel remarked.

Freyn nodded. "They'll do for brute force. This is mostly just to psyche out the Alphazenians."

One male, a tall, rather muscular one with longish brown hair,

began to approach the brothers.

“He’s malfunctioning!” Askel exclaimed.

“You! Cease movement!” Freyn commanded, pointing at the errant unit.

“Am I still allowed to breathe?” he replied, with a slight smile.

“Ahhh!” Askel yelped. “He’s scary!”

“Idiot,” Freyn hissed, suddenly realizing their error. “He’s not an automatic unit.”

“I apologize, I didn’t mean to alarm you. I thought you saw me walk up just now. I’m Ayuda, the new bodyguard.” He gave them a dazzling smile that left the brothers breathless.

“Holy shit,” Askel whispered.

“Excuse me?”

Freyn elbowed his brother, eliciting a yelp from him. “Don’t mind us. We’re a little overexcited, what with the Commander coming and all. We’re really not used to anything more than guarding fancy Blondie parties and such. I’m Freyn. And this moron here is my brother Askel.”

“Hey,” Askel protested, rubbing his side.

“Nice to meet you,” Ayuda answered, with a slight bow. “I’m reporting for duty?”

“Ah. Yes. Sure. Well, Odi should be here momentarily.”

“He’s the only one who knows what’s going on,” Askel clarified.

“Idiot. I know what’s going on,” Freyn retorted indignantly.

“Since when? You thought Ayuda here was an automated unit!”

“So did you!”

“Yes, but—”

“I take it *Odi* is the Head of Security?”

The brothers ceased arguing for a moment. “Yeah. I’ve already buzzed him. I don’t where the hell he is.”

As if on cue, the door to the penthouse slid open and Odi emerged, taking in the scene without much reaction, as though he saw a hallway full of armed beautiful men every day. He appraised Ayuda, realizing he was the new bodyguard he had called in.

“I’m Odi,” he greeted, with a nod. “You must be Ayuda?”

“Yes.”

Odi looked him over, pleased with the bodyguard's impressive physique and rather pronounced muscles. He would be perfect for Iason's personal bodyguard. "You'll do very well," he commented.

"Thank you," Ayuda replied, with a slight smile.

"You've been briefed?"

"Yes," Ayuda answered, holding up his cellpad. "The Commander is due sometime tomorrow?"

"His ETA is about N19:00, but we're assuming he could come at any time."

Ayuda nodded. "Then, what shall I do now?"

"I'll take you around the penthouse and show you everything and introduce you to Lord Mink."

Now Odi seemed to see the automated units for the first time. "Did they come looking like this?" he asked, mystified.

"We made them transform," Askel replied, grinning.

"Well, this is unacceptable. They look more like a harem than an army. Have them transform into less attractive, more formidable forms. And some units should remain mecha."

"Can't we keep one or two nice ones?" Askel protested, pointing out his favorites.

"How did you *ever* become a bodyguard?" Odi demanded, shaking his head.

Ayuda struggled to keep from laughing, finding the brothers the most ridiculously absurd bodyguards he'd ever encountered. He was still desperately trying not to lose it completely over their initial reaction to his entrance, the way the smaller one—Askel—had screamed, and how neither could distinguish an automated unit from a real Amoian. It was no wonder Odi had called for an additional bodyguard. He was, frankly, bewildered. These were the bodyguards of Iason Mink?

But, he reasoned, perhaps they had qualities he had not yet perceived, though perception was one of Ayuda's many gifts. He noticed everything, and within minutes he usually had developed a fairly accurate cognitive map of his surroundings. He knew that everything in his environment was potentially important information, and he was very careful about taking note of every detail. As he

followed Odi, he was keenly aware that the bodyguard was upset about something. He could tell this from the stiffness of his shoulders, and the way his jaw was set. His hesitation as they passed the kitchen alerted him that the source of his angst was located within; unless he was afraid of the upside-down caramel cake he could smell baking, Ayuda guessed that Odi and the chef had some sort of “issue.” Romance gone awry perhaps?

Odi started to pass the kitchen and then stopped. “I suppose I should show you the hidden passageway.”

“By all means,” Ayuda replied, his eyes twinkling.

Odi pushed open the kitchen door—a little tentatively, it seemed to Ayuda, as though he were entering forbidden territory—and the look on the young man’s face confirmed his suspicions that the bodyguard and the cook were “involved.”

“Sorry to disturb you, Tai,” Odi said softly, “but this is Ayuda, Iason’s new bodyguard. I wanted to show him the entranceway.”

Tai nodded sharply, turning away without further comment. Ayuda watched the interaction between the two with interest, now convinced that they were lovers engaged in some sort of argument. Odi fumbled with the switch to open the hidden door and Ayuda nodded, impressed. He would not have guessed, had he not been shown, that there was a secret door within the chopping block; in the elevator on the way up to the penthouse, he had been vaguely puzzled about the time it took to move from the previous floor to the penthouse—it had seemed to him somehow longer than the distance between the other floors. Now he knew this had not been his imagination: Odi revealed that the stairway led to an entire floor beneath the penthouse.

“Very clever,” Ayuda remarked. “Who designed it?”

“I assume the main architect, Megala Chi,” Odi replied, shrugging. “But I really don’t know.”

“Where are the other secret doors?”

Now Odi smiled. “How do you know there are others?”

Ayuda smiled. “Where there’s one, there’s bound to be more.”

Odi laughed. “Well, you happen to be right. There’s one more that I know of, that leads to the Observatory.”

Ayuda suspected that, in fact, the penthouse was full of surprises and secret passageways, and he looked forward to discovering the others. It was something of a game to him, uncovering all that was hidden. Aroguay, his teacher, had always told him that way to gain a Master's respect was to show him you could not be fooled.

They were approaching the library, and Ayuda saw the great Blondie within, sitting in a big chair with his legs crossed, reading from a small book. He startled when Odi approached, closing the book as though he did not want to risk the contents being observed. Ayuda was surprised to see him up close; he had not expected him to be wearing spectacles, nor was he quite prepared for Iason's extraordinary, breathtaking beauty.

"Sorry to disturb you, Sir," Odi said, "but this is Ayuda. He'll be your personal bodyguard."

"Ah." Lord Mink removed his spectacles, nodding as he looked the bodyguard over. "Yes," he murmured. Ayuda was exactly what he'd hoped for; he wanted his personal bodyguard to seem formidable and yet still be pleasantly attractive.

"He's acceptable, then?"

"He'll do nicely." Iason offered him a small smile, but Ayuda could tell that the Blondie's thoughts were somewhere else entirely. He had a hunch it had something to do with the book he held, and he wondered what was in it.

"I'm showing him around now, and then I'll key in his clearances."

Lord Mink nodded, seeming anxious for them to leave.

"Then, we'll leave you to your studies."

Odi then showed Ayuda the rest of the penthouse, including the secret passageway to the Observatory. "Do you have any questions at this point?" he asked.

"Actually, yes. The chef—Tai—he's Aristian?"

The bodyguard visibly flinched at the mention of his name, but quickly recovered. "Yes?"

"Is that going to be a problem? I mean, with the Commander?"

"I'm sorry? I'm not following you."

"I mean, because of the Aristian massacre?"

Odi fell silent, stopping dead in his tracks. "Massacre?"

“You don’t know what I’m referring to?”

The bodyguard sighed, closing his eyes. “I knew this was all out of my league. No, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The Aristian massacre took place a few years ago, when the Commander first began his campaigns. They stopped on Aristia to relax, and his men decided to do some pillaging. They sacked an entire village before Khosi finally put a halt to it. Several hundred people were killed, including children. The Commander apologized formally to the Prince for his men’s actions and the Prince allowed him to go without any form of retribution. The Aristians were very angry about this; rumor has it Khosi seduced the Prince to gain his support.”

Annoyed that Tai had never mentioned this to him, Odi shook his head. “I had no idea about this. But I do know that Tai is a cousin of the Prince.”

“A cousin?” Ayuda found this surprising, given the young man’s current occupation. “Then, perhaps that will not be a problem.”

“We’d better discuss the matter with Tai, just in case. And we’ll need to alert Iason.”

Ayuda nodded.

“Thank goodness you knew something about this. I would hate for there to have been any surprises tomorrow.”

“Agreed, but as long as Tai’s origins are included in the debriefing, we should be fine.”

“You’ve dealt with dignitaries before, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Oh yes. While I worked in Urus, mostly.”

“Good.”

They made their way back to the kitchen area, and this time Odi was not hesitant about entering Tai’s domain.

Surprised, Tai looked up, freezing when he saw Odi’s expression.

“I would have thought you’d have told me about the massacre, Tai.”

The Aristian looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I wasn’t sure what to say.”

“How about: Commander Khosi massacred a few hundred Aristians a few years ago, and many of my people are still very angry

about it.”

“I’m sorry. I considered saying something, but it didn’t really involve me. I heard about it, of course, and knew that the Commander had come to visit my cousin afterward. It was horrible and all, but...I guess I was too focused on my own concerns at the time.”

“I would have thought,” Odi repeated, lowering his voice a bit, “that you would have at least told *me*.”

“I guess I should have,” Tai replied, glancing nervously at Ayuda.

“Iason won’t be happy that you didn’t come forward with this information. You’re probably in for some punishment.”

Nodding, Tai bowed his head, twisting his shirt nervously in his hands.

“We’re going to tell him now. You might as well come with us.”

Sighing, Tai followed Odi out of the kitchen. The three of them made their way silently to the library, where Lord Mink was still absorbed in Yousi’s logs.

Once again, the Blondie startled at their approach, quickly closing the book.

“I’m sorry to disturb you again, Sir, but Ayuda has just informed me of an event that I knew nothing about, which took place on Aristia a few years ago, when the Voshka Khosi was there: a massacre, instigated by the Commander’s men.”

As soon as Odi said these words, Iason suddenly realized what he was speaking about. He had a vague memory of the massacre, although he was unaware of the details, nor did he realize the Commander had been involved. It had occurred in the days before Khosi’s rise to power and his subsequent intergalactic fame.

He looked at Tai, who blushed furiously.

“Why did you not mention something about this, Tai?” Iason demanded.

“I should have. But it didn’t really concern me, so I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Nonsense. You know perfectly well that as soon as the Commander or his guards realized you were Aristian, there would be trouble,” Iason scolded.

Tai nodded, too terrified to reply.

"You will keep nothing like this from me in the future, Tai. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Tai whispered.

Now the Blondie sighed, removing his spectacles and rubbing his eyes. "I'm not going to punish you. I need you focused on your work today. You may go."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." The Aristian backed away, breathing a sigh of relief.



OMAKI HAD JUST RETURNED HOME from driving Yousi back to his home in Eos. It had been a perplexing trip, punctuated every few minutes by sudden exclamations and pronouncements from Yousi as memories reemerged in his awareness, sprouting up and blossoming quickly in the fertile terrain of his regenerating mind.

"That's where Heiku had his accident," he yelled at one point, nearly causing Omaki to share a similar fate.

"Please, Yousi," Lord Ghan scolded gently, "you mustn't startle me like that when I'm driving. You'll get us both killed."

"I'm sorry. But...I'm right, aren't I?"

Omaki nodded. "Yes."

The Blondie tried not to think about that nightmarish day, when Heiku had lost his arm in a horrific accident on the Tanaguran freeway while trying to save the passengers of another vehicle. The vehicle had flipped precariously onto its side, and a boy was pinned beneath it, tangled in the rubble. Heiku attempted to pull him out, but as he did so, the vehicle shifted and fell, crushing the boy and severing the Blondie's arm.

The accident had happened about five years after they had left the Academy. The three of them—Heiku, Omaki and Yousi—had been inseparable; Heiku's accident was a devastating blow to them all, particularly because at the time, Yousi and Heiku had just become intimate—or at least, Lord Ghan suspected as much. Yousi had nearly gone out of his mind with worry when his condition was critical and the outlook uncertain.

But Heiku, like all Blondies, was exceptionally strong, and he recovered completely. In fact, he had been quite pleased with his new bionic prosthesis, which, as a surgeon, afforded him precision and utility that was incomparable. His limb was computerized and fully programmable, allowing him to direct a laser beam from the tip of his finger. Surgeon and tool were thus one, which was why Heiku was the greatest surgeon Tanagura—or Amoi, for that matter—had ever known.

Omaki laughed softly, remembering Heiku's excitement over his prosthetic arm.

"Why are you laughing?" Yousi demanded, still feeling disturbed by the memory of the accident.

"I was just remembering how Heiku was so proud of that blasted arm," Lord Ghan explained.

Yousi smiled, nodding. "Yes! I remember that." He then sat quietly for a moment, looking rather perplexed.

"Is something wrong?"

The Blondie shook his head, puzzling over Heiku. He was convinced there was something *special* about him. He'd always felt it whenever the Blondie had come into his shop. Lord Quiahtenon had been especially kind to him, he remembered, not like other customers who snapped at him when he made a mistake, or when he was slow—which was most of the time. No, Heiku had always encouraged him. "Don't rush," he would say, soothingly, as Yousi tried, with trembling hands, to enter in the purchase codes. Or, "You're doing just fine, Yousi. Don't be afraid."

But it was more than that. Lord Xuuju quivered whenever Heiku was near. It wasn't exactly that he was frightened of the Blondie. There was just something about him that he couldn't quite put his finger on, a familiarity that he found comforting and at the same time a little disconcerting.

Omaki studied him, worried. "You should rest when you get home. Forget about the shop for a few days—let your attendants manage it."

"I'll let my attendants manage it," Yousi repeated, almost robotically, once again feeling excessively tired. He closed his eyes, falling asleep almost right away.

Lord Ghan observed him as he drove, again puzzling over what was happening to him. And on the way back to the Taming Tower he began to worry about what *would* happen, should Jupiter learn of his returning memories. He had no doubt that Yousi would be forced to submit to a second modification, and he could not bear the thought of losing his old friend again.

All their talk of Heiku had brought another thought into his mind: he realized that he needed to contact him and tell him about Yousi's condition. Perhaps Heiku, as a physician, could better understand the situation or how modified neuronal tissue might possibly regenerate.

Back at the Taming Tower, Lord Ghan was greeted only by Ru, Enyu and Kahlan as he entered the penthouse. He frowned, looking around. "Where's Aki?" Typically the boy came running as soon as he stepped foot into the house.

"He's in his room," Ru answered. "He's been there all day."

"All day?"

Worried, the Blondie hurried to Aki's room. He opened the door to find the boy sitting on the floor, crying.

He crouched down next to him. "What's all this about?" he asked gently. "What's wrong, Aki?"

"I don't want to go away," Aki answered, tears streaming down his face.

"Come here, my little love." Omaki scooped him up and sat down on the bed, holding him on his lap. "Now, I don't want you to go away, either. But we don't have a choice. And remember, I will come and see you as often as you would like—every day, if you prefer."

"Yes," Aki sniffed, "come every day."

"Then, it's settled. I will come and see you every day. Iason will be quite sick of me." He kissed Aki on the cheek, giving him a mischievous look. "Maybe he'll even punish me for coming over so often."

This elicited a giggle from Aki as he imagined his Master being punished by Lord Mink.

"Oh, you find that funny, do you?" the Blondie teased. "Do you know what happens to little boys who laugh at their Masters being punished?"

Aki shook his head, eyes wide.

"They get *kissed and kissed, and kissed some more.*"

The boy giggled furiously as Omaki began kissing him all over his face and neck.

"It tickles!" he squealed. "Help! I'm being kissed to death!"

"Very well, if you insist, I will stop kissing you. Oh, but it is very *very* tempting with such a cute little boy upon my lap."

"I'm not a little boy," Aki protested indignantly. "I'll be *nine* winters old on Astrajia's Rest!" He punctuated this statement by pointing his finger to the ceiling, as though conveying with this dramatic gesture the significance of having attained nine years.

"Ah, yes. You're quite right: how wrong of me not to acknowledge your non-littleboyness."

"Yousi told me that nine is an important year," Aki continued excitedly.

"That's true. You'll receive an official notification from Jupiter, acknowledging your existence and confirming your citizenship."

"But Jupiter already knows about me because she won't let me stay with you."

Lord Ghan smiled. "Yes. It is a mere formality."

"What's a mirror morphality?"

"A *mere formality*," the Blondie repeated slowly. "It just means, Aki, that even though Jupiter knows about the birth of every citizen, she does not officially recognize anyone until their ninth year."

"But why not?"

Omaki shook his head. "To be honest, I don't know. It's just how it has always been done."

"What will happen?"

"You'll receive several things: your citizenship certificate and identification chips, and a cellpad with a holographic greeting from Jupiter."

"A greeting from Jupiter?" Aki repeated excitedly.

"Yes: but the greeting will only play one time."

"Oh. Why only once?"

"Again, I don't know. Jupiter is very careful about limiting access to her image."

“Maybe because it makes her seem more special if you never see her,” the boy hypothesized.

“That’s very clever, Aki,” Omaki acknowledged, “and you may be right. You’re very smart.”

“So then the day after that...is when I’m leaving?”

“Yes. But don’t forget, there’s a party waiting for you. And Commander Khosi may be there.”

“And I can feed the fish,” Aki added.

“There’s something else you should know about Iason’s penthouse,” Omaki whispered.

“What?” Aki whispered back, his eyes lighting up.

“It has *secret passageways*.”

“Secret passageways!” Aki yelled, beside himself with excitement. “You mean like the one...with the curly stairs?”

“You mean the door to the Observatory. Yes; but there are others as well.”

“How many?”

“I’m not sure of the exact number, but there’s at least one more that I know of.”

“How do you know, if it’s a secret?” Aki demanded suspiciously.

“I know because the Blondie who designed the Eos Tower is a friend of mine. He told me.” In fact, Lord Ghan had garnered this information one night, years earlier, when he and Megala had slept together.

For Aki, the revelation of these secret passageways almost made up for the penthouse’s principle defect: an egregious paucity of slides. His Master’s promise to visit him every day was also reassuring, and the prospect of meeting Commander Khosi now resumed its prominent position in assuaging his anxieties about the move.

“Do you suppose there is any cake left?” Omaki whispered.

“Let’s find out!” Aki jumped off his lap, but was quickly seized by his Master.

“Wait just a minute. I need one more kiss.” With that, Lord Ghan kissed the top of the boy’s head, and then released him, smiling.

Aki ran out of his room and to the kitchen, his arrival greeted with relief by the other members of the household, who had all been

worried about him.

"Master says I can have some cake!" he yelled.

Ru and Kahlan exchanged a look, smiling.

"Did he, now? But...suppose it's all gone?"

"Who ate it, then?" the boy demanded.

"Let's see." Ru opened the cake tin, revealing the fact that plenty of the wanted dessert remained.

"There's *lots* of cake!" Aki announced happily.

"So it seems." Ru prepared a piece for him, and then turned to Kahlan. "Would you like some?"

"No," Kahlan laughed. "I already had three pieces. It was delicious, though."

"I wonder if Commander Khosi likes cake?" Aki said, with a mouth full of the dessert.

"He is a very silly commander, if he doesn't," Kahlan replied, "though I don't imagine we'll ever know."

"I'll ask him," Aki promised.

Kahlan smiled tolerantly. "I'm sure you will."

Aki nodded. "I will, when I meet him."

"I have no doubt you *will* meet him one day, Commander Aki," Kahlan said solemnly, giving him a salute.

"I'm meeting him on Jupiter's Eve!"

"Are you, now?"

"Actually, he *is*," Ru confirmed. "The Commander will be visiting Iason Mink. He supposedly may be at the party. Maybe we'll all get to meet him."

"What?" Kahlan looked positively startled with this news, his face growing pale.

Enyu nodded in agreement. "Yes, I heard that, too. He's coming here for the Trade Convention."

"Kahlan, what's wrong?" Ru studied the young man, concerned.

Kahlan only shook his head. Up until that point, he had managed to remain unaffected about any talk of Commander Khosi. He'd grown accustomed, over the past two years, to hearing the man's name mentioned frequently—indeed, who *hadn't* heard countless tales of the famous military leader? He'd learned, on such occasions,

to detach himself from the conversation, so that the turmoil of emotions buried within would not be released from imprisonment. For his own sanity, he could not bear to think of the Commander as a *real* person: he was an abstract idea, a story...a shifting dream.

But now, to learn that Voshka Khosi would actually be in Tanagura, that he might, in fact, be in the very same room with him at Aki's Guardianship Party, sent chills through his body.

Ru put a hand on his shoulder. "You look ill."

"I need some fresh air."

Lord Ghan entered the kitchen and, seeing Aki with chocolate on his face, smiled. "I see you found the cake."

"I already ate it," Aki admitted.

Omaki laughed. "Well then, go wash your face, and then you may play."

"Yes, Master!" Aki slid off his chair and then ran to the bath hall.

The Blondie then turned his attention to Enyu, a smile tugging at his lips. "Come with me, pet."

Excited, the Xeronian followed his Master, knowing immediately from his look what Omaki had in mind.

"Come on," Ru urged, helping Kahlan to his feet. "Let's go out to the balcony."

Nodding, Kahlan followed him outside. "It's so cold here," he mumbled sadly.

"I'll get your coat," Ru replied.

"No, don't go."

"Then," Ru whispered, putting his arms around Kahlan from behind, "does this help?"

"Yes," the Aristian admitted, enjoying his warm embrace. It seemed perfectly natural that they should be thus, snuggling together under the winter stars.

"So...what's wrong?"

Kahlan sighed. "I told you...about what happened to my family?"

"Yes?"

"Well, they were killed by Commander Khosi's men. And not just them, lots of other families, too."

"Shit." Ru pulled Kahlan against him, holding him even tighter.

"I'm trying to think of what to say, but I can't think of anything," he confessed.

"You don't have to say anything. It's not like I'm going to do anything. It's just hard."

"What do you mean, '*do anything*'?"

"I mean I won't seek revenge."

"You don't want to avenge your family?"

"No. It would only cause more pain and suffering. Even if I were able to kill the Commander—which I doubt I could ever manage, anyway—it would only hurt the people who love him, people who haven't done anything wrong. Anyway, it was his men who actually did the killing, and I'll never know who they were."

Ru listened, smiling. "You're a good person, Kahlan."

"Not really. I just don't like violence."

"Me either."

"Not like my friend, Wyn."

"Wyn?"

"Wyn Quantum. He...his family was killed, too. Only he vowed to never rest until he avenged them. But when I wouldn't join him, we had a falling out."

"That's too bad."

Kahlan nodded. "Yeah, especially because I really understood his pain." He laughed, shaking his head. "He was something else."

Now Ru felt a small stab of jealousy. "You loved him, I think?"

"Yes. I mean, not the way you're thinking: I loved him as a friend." He smiled. "Funny, he was the only Aristian ever born with blond hair."

"That's peculiar," Ru remarked.

Kahlan felt silent. Something about Ru's arms around him...made him feel strange, but in a good way. He liked the way Ru smelled, and suddenly he had an overwhelming desire to kiss him.

"Ru?"

"Yeah?"

"I like being together like this."

"Me, too."

"Can I kiss you?"

“Yes.”

Now Kahlan turned around, shivering both from the cold and from nervousness, and slowly leaned forward to softly press his lips against Ru’s.

He’d never kissed anyone before, nor had Ru ever been kissed. It was a brief kiss of innocence, sweet and perfect in its purity. He pulled away, his heart pounding.

“I really wanted to do that.”

“I really wanted you to,” Ru admitted.

“Yeah?”

Ru nodded. “I like you, Kahlan.”

Kahlan smiled. “I like you, Ru. And...thanks, for this. But let’s go back inside now before we freeze to death.”

Laughing, the boys went back into the inviting warmth of Lord Ghan’s home, each of them tingling from their first kiss.



IT WAS LATE BY THE TIME IASON FINALLY went to bed, creeping into the mongrel’s bedroom where Riki already lay sprawled, fast asleep. He was completely naked, the sheets coiled impossibly around his body. One arm was flung over his head and his legs were spread wide apart, taking up as much space in the bed as was possible.

Iason smiled as he undressed, unable to help himself: he loved to watch his pet sleep, adoring the way he seemed so vulnerable and boyish, and treasuring the tiny grunts and vocalizations he made.

As he scooted into bed next to him, he couldn’t resist nuzzling up to him a bit. Riki sighed and rolled onto his side, away from him, and the Blondie immediately took advantage of his inviting backside, snuggling up close. Predictably, he became aroused by Riki’s warm, naked flesh pressed against his own; his erection developed quickly, twitching against the mongrel’s buttocks as he struggled to rein in his desire.

He suddenly felt overcome with need: his thighs ached with it, and without even meaning to he began gently thrusting up against Riki, a low moan escaping him.

"Help. I'm being molested by a horny Blondie," Riki groaned, his voice thick and raspy with sleep.

"Oh, Riki," Iason breathed, kissing the back of his neck urgently, his hands sliding down his warm body.

Riki sighed. "You might as well fuck me, otherwise neither of us is getting any sleep."

This proclamation, delivered with typical mongrelesque enthusiasm, was accepted by the Blondie as invitation enough. He retrieved some sex oil and poured a generous quantity of it onto his stiffened member, trembling as he lubricated himself. It had been two days since they'd engaged in coital congress—not since Riki had run away—and Iason couldn't wait to be inside him again.

"Are you still very sore?" he asked.

"As if that would stop you, if I were," Riki laughed. "I've been worse. You were right about the Accelerator—that stuff makes a big difference."

"Good. I want you terribly, pet." Iason slipped a well-oiled finger into the mongrel's rectum, attempting to prepare him for his entrance. It was always the case that when any significant amount of time passed without penetration, Riki grew tighter.

The Blondie groaned. He found that his lust was nearly uncontainable; he wanted his pet so much that he was literally shaking.

"Bloody hell. Did you get into the cider again?" Riki asked, as Iason covered his backside with kisses and teasing bites, his fingers moving everywhere the Blondie could reach.

"I need you."

"Yeah, I got that much. Well, hurry up then, so I can get back to sleep."

"Are you sure you're ready?" Iason wiggled his fingers inside him, excited by his tight grip.

"Go ahead and stick it in, might as well get it over with. I don't think I'm going to—*ow!*"

"Oh love," Lord Mink gasped, his eyes rolling back with pleasure as he squeezed inside the mongrel. "You feel positively divine."

"Yeah well...you feel like a gigantic horse cock, as usual."

“You’re gripping me wonderfully,” the Blondie hissed, as he began thrusting, too excited to hold back.

“Take it easy. I won’t be able to move tomorrow if you don’t ease up.”

Ignoring him, Iason became even more insistent, rocking against him mercilessly as he ran his hands up and down his body. He kissed and then bit the mongrel’s shoulder, eliciting a yelp of surprise from him.

“Ow! Holy fuck! Why are you such a sex demon tonight?”

“Because I haven’t *fucked you* in awhile.”

“Oo. I like it when you talk dirty like that,” Riki gasped, his cock finally awakening to the Blondie’s intoxicating lovemaking. His organ twitched and quickly filled, rolling and lengthening in a matter of seconds.

“Admit that you like my cock in your ass,” Iason demanded.

“Okay, I admit it.”

“Yes? You like it when I fuck you?”

“Oh yeah, that’s hot,” Riki moaned. “Keep talking dirty: yes, I like it when you fuck me!”

“Do you want to come? Hmmm?”

Although his hands freely roamed the terrain of Riki’s body, twisting his nipples and delicately tracing the hollow of his pelvic bone, Iason had deliberately avoided the mongrel’s swelling organ, hoping to tease him; Riki now found this unbearable and, with bold initiative, seized his hand and guided him to his matured, thickened erection.

“Yes! Make me come.”

Lord Mink, exceptionally excited by Riki’s interest, which was rarely so definitively expressed, slithered his still-oiled fingers the length of his shaft. “Is this what you want, my pet? Your cock in my hand?” He nibbled on the mongrel’s earlobe as he began pleasuring him with slow, firm strokes. “Ah, you’re so engorged, you’re nearly ready to burst. You like this, don’t you?”

“God, yes,” Riki groaned, shivering.

“How about this?” The Blondie accelerated the cadence of his pump, eliciting a pleased gasp from his pet.

“Fuck yeah! Like *that*! Keep doing that!”

“You see? I know what you like,” Iason whispered in his ear. “You can’t deny how your body responds to me. Don’t be so quick to throw everything away.”

“I’m coming!”

“Oh, pet,” Iason breathed, beside himself with pleasure and desire. The mongrel’s moans, exclamations and gasps, coupled with the unparalleled perfection of the fuck—his engorged cock squeezing again and again into the gloriously tight resistance of his ass—brought him quickly to the brink: when Riki began groaning his release, he followed suite. He closed his eyes and, gasping erratically, ejaculated, riding the swells of his pleasure until the waves receded and finally ceased. Then he slowly withdrew, rolling onto his back and taking his pet into his arms.

Riki snuggled up to him, smiling. “Holy shit! That was some badass sex! I came so hard I thought my cock might explode. Maybe we should skip a few days now and then, if it feels *that* good.”

Although Lord Mink knew this was a valid suggestion, he simply couldn’t bear the thought of sacrificing his daily congress with Riki, even for the otherwise laudable goal of enhanced pleasure.

“I need to be with you every day, pet.”

“Yeah, I know,” Riki smiled. “You can’t make it through the day without a good rod in the hole, can you? So what did you do before you found me? Or did you fuck your other pets, too?”

Iason thought about this for a moment, remembering his years of celibacy after he and Raoul had fallen out, and the many pets that had come and gone in his household. Although he admittedly *always* enjoyed watching his pets—and he certainly always ejaculated—he had quickly tired of their scripted performances and predictable behavior and had discarded them at a ridiculously accelerated rate, typically acquiring a new pet every few months. And, although he’d fantasized about violating pets his entire life, and such desires had formed the very core of his autoerotic fodder, he’d never once *seriously* contemplated taking a pet to his bed: the very thought was inconceivable and quite forbidden. No, such deviant ideas were relegated to the fantasy realms of his inner terrain, to be considered

only in the privacy of his most secret thoughts as he watched his pets perform. It was only after Riki came into his household that he began to regularly engage in the unthinkable—sexual congress with his pet.

“No,” he replied. “I have told you before; you were the first.”

“Did you think about it, though?”

“Oh, yes.”

“You wanted to do it, but you didn’t?”

“Yes,” Iason admitted.

“I’m guessing that’s why you are so into the whole *watching* thing,” Riki hypothesized. “At least, when I first came here, you always made me jerk off for you.”

Lord Mink smiled, remembering. He’d found the mongrel to be the most exciting pet he’d ever viewed. Perhaps because Riki had never been trained to be a pet, his performances—however reluctantly tendered—were nevertheless genuine, and the Blondie had taken great pleasure in watching him. Almost immediately, he had wondered what it would be like to truly take Riki to his bed and, not long after that, he began to contemplate actually doing so. He’d gotten an intimate taste of him the first day they’d met; perhaps that was why he had, from the very beginning, taken extraordinary liberties with Riki. He simply couldn’t keep his hands off him, no matter how hard he tried.

“Who was your favorite pet before me?” Riki asked.

Surprised by the question, Iason shook his head. “I really couldn’t say,” he answered honestly. “One was very much like another, in many respects.”

“Surely at least *one* must have stood out,” the mongrel pressed. “Wasn’t there one you especially wanted to pair with?”

The Blondie paused for a moment, considering. “There was a pet named Yenna I was rather attached to,” he confessed finally. “He was rather clever, more so than the others.”

Riki frowned. “What did he look like?”

“He had a porcelain white complexion, very long, black hair, and large, violet eyes. He was slender, with beautiful long legs and an ass I used to dream about. Quite stunning, actually.”

“I’m sure he was,” the mongrel muttered grumpily. “Was he more

attractive than me?”

“No,” Iason replied carefully. “He *was* very attractive, as you are, but much different than you. He was quite the head-turner, I must say. I suppose I’ve always had a taste for something a little more exotic, when it came to my pets. I prefer a pet that gets attention and stands out from the rest.”

“Well, you got that with me, anyway.”

“Yes,” the Blondie agreed.

“But you don’t dream about my ass, I guess,” Riki probed rather forlornly.

At this, Lord Mink threw back his head and laughed.

The mongrel narrowed his eyes. “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“Come here,” the Blondie commanded, pulling him on top of his body. He reached down and, with both hands, gently massaged the mongrel’s buttocks. “I’ve never wanted any pet the way I want you, Riki. And for the record, I *adore* your ass, more than Yenna’s, even.”

“I do have a pretty nice ass,” Riki said with a grin, his confidence returning.

“You needn’t be jealous, pet. Yenna meant nothing to me, compared to you.”

“Iason?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want you to go to bed with the Commander.”

“So, it *would* upset you.”

“Yes,” Riki admitted. “Promise me you won’t.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot make such a promise, pet.”

“Why not?” the mongrel demanded.

“The situation is complicated.”

“But I’m asking you not to. Don’t you care about what I want?”

Iason smiled sadly. “Of course I do, Riki. But I cannot let my personal inclinations interfere with my business responsibilities.”

Riki scoffed at this. “Since when is it your responsibility to be some pervert’s fuck toy? I thought you Blondies weren’t into all that.”

“The Commander is...an exception. He’s a very powerful man.”

“Whatever,” the mongrel sighed, rolling his eyes. “So you’re saying, he’s special, he gets to fuck you.”

“No, I am saying it is important that the Commander not be offended during his visit.”

“If he asks you to go to bed with him, what are you going to say?”

“Riki,” the Blondie sighed. “Please try to understand.”

“Oh, I understand. I understand perfectly. You’re going to be his little Blondie slut, aren’t you? I’m guessing he gets the top.” The mongrel moved off him and fell dramatically onto his back, pouting.

“You needn’t be jealous, pet,” Iason said softly, rolling onto his side.

“Don’t worry, I’m not,” Riki replied irritably. “Why should I be jealous?”

Lord Mink smiled at this, saying nothing.

“Please tell me you’ll at least hold him off for a few days. Don’t go jumping into bed with him the moment he arrives. Can you at least promise me that much?”

“Very well; I promise I will not engage in sexual contact with the Commander on his first day here.”

“Are you attracted to him?”

“Riki,” Iason laughed.

“How is that a funny question?”

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, pet. Commander Khosi is a very attractive man, as you surely know. He is considered one of the most handsome men alive. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t attracted to him. Would you prefer I lied to you?”

“No, I don’t want you to lie,” Riki grumbled. “Personally, I don’t see what’s so great about him. I got a good look: he’s not anything all that special. Anyway, what happened to Yenna?”

Iason’s eyes grew dark and impenetrable at this question. He looked away, frowning. “I sold him to a visiting Galathian.”

“A Galathian, huh? Aren’t they supposed to be hideously ugly? He must have really pissed you off for you to do that.”

“He did. He paired with another pet without my permission.”

At this, Riki quieted, nervously thinking about Ima and feeling glad that he hadn’t told Iason about her, after all. But what would he do if he found out they had been together?

“Iason?”

“Yes, Riki?”

“Did you mean it when you said you’d never sell me?”

“I meant it,” the Blondie promised, gently kissing his face. “I would sooner give my own life than give you up.”

Riki smiled at this answer, closing his eyes. With that, Master and pet fell asleep, entangled in one another’s arms.

7

The Commander Cometh

“YOU’LL WEAR THIS, PET.” IASON DROPPED a flimsy chain-mail outfit onto the bed as the mongrel struggled to wake up. “Go take a shower and make yourself presentable.”

Riki looked at his proposed attire and then picked it up, his eyes narrowing.

“You’ve got to be bloody kidding me.”

“Now, don’t be difficult today, pet.”

“Why don’t I just go naked if you’re so bent on showing me off?”

“Very well, if that’s your preference.”

“Well, I guess I could wear it,” Riki replied grumpily, realizing *some* coverage was better than none at all, “if you want me to.”

The Blondie smiled. “Yes, that *is* what I want. Obey me today, Riki. I expect you to address me properly and behave in a manner befitting of a pet.”

“How am I supposed to know what’s *befitting* when I never attended the blasted Pet Academy?”

“Riki, I have been taming you for over two years. You know what I expect from you.”

“So that’s what you’ve been trying to do, huh?” Riki shot back. “I just thought you were being a sadistic fuck. Here’s a news bulletin: I’m untamable.”

Lord Mink took hold of Riki’s chin as he bent down to look him full in the face.

“Oh, I’ll tame you. No matter how long it takes, nor what I’m compelled to do. We can take the short route, or the long, painful one. Both lead to the same place—your submission to me. It’s up to *you* which course we’ll take.” The Blondie spoke softly, but firmly, the intensity in his eyes conveying his sincerity on this point.

Riki quieted, deciding that Iason was in full Master mode, which meant his usual teasing and mouthing off wouldn’t be tolerated. After two years, he’d finally learned to read the Blondie and know when he was allowed his usual freedoms of speech and manner, and when he was expected to conform to the demeanor of a submissive pet.

Lord Mink’s frequently shifting moods and the accompanying changes in his permissions had been a source of great mystification and frustration to the street-wise mongrel, who had never encountered anyone with such a complicated repertoire of mind games. By now, however, he’d learned that each of his Master’s many faces was connected to a separate template of expected behaviors. Though he claimed he could not be tamed, by learning how to read and respond to Iason in ways that involved the least amount of punishment—*most* of the time—the mongrel had, in fact, already learned exactly what his Master wanted him to know.

Iason Mink had almost succeeded in taming Riki.

Almost.

“Whatever,” Riki sighed. “Can I have a smoke, please? I’m about to die of the jitters.”

“You may not smoke today, pet.”

“Why not?”

“Because yesterday you purchased cigarettes without permission, didn’t you? I found the packs in your jacket pocket.”

“But you already punished me for yesterday,” the mongrel protested.

“I punished you for *running away*,” the Blondie clarified, “but I just learned about the cigarettes today. So, as punishment, your ration today has been forfeited.”

“That sucks!”

“Do I need to get out the counting stick again, Riki?”

The mongrel scowled, but had the good sense to say nothing more.

"Tomorrow, however, I will return your cigarettes to you."

Riki brightened at this. "You will? Really?"

"Yes. I've decided that I'm going to trust you to moderate your own intake. But if you want to keep this privilege, I expect you to cut back on your previous regimen."

"I will," the mongrel promised eagerly, thrilled that he would finally be getting his smoking privileges back, although he was not looking forward to waiting a whole day for his next smoke. He rewarded the Blondie with a dazzling smile. "Thank you, Iason."

Lord Mink nodded, pleased with his reaction. His decision to reinstate Riki's normal smoking privileges was in actuality a practical calculation: since Iason also planned to allow him access to the Saloon, where he could easily acquire smokes from other pets, it simply did not make sense to keep the restriction in force.

"Now, go clean up and get dressed. When you're ready, Tai has some food ready for you."

"Yeah, I'm actually pretty hungry."

Iason turned and walked off without another word.

Riki shook his head. It had been a long time since he had seen him so preoccupied and "stern." He found that he rather disliked this side of the Blondie and he was certainly *not* looking forward to the Commander's visit. He gazed at the chain bikini again and sighed.

"Bloody hell," he grumbled, making for the bath hall. He dreaded being put in chains again and being manacled to the hall post like some animal. Memories of his early days at the penthouse flooded back: he had *hated* the way Iason had treated him then, with such contempt. The more he thought about it, the more annoyed he became. All of this was due to the stupid Commander's visit. Riki knew he hadn't been imagining things when he heard Voshka Khosi coming onto Iason—in fact, the Blondie was acting as though he had some diplomatic responsibility to jump into bed with the man! That would be just one more thing Riki had to deal with today, and he wouldn't be able to do a thing about it.

All these thoughts began to converge in the poor mongrel's mind, so that by the time he had cleaned up, he had worked himself into a state. When he finally stood before the mirror, contemplating his

scantily-clad body in the ridiculously non-existent chain-mail briefs, it was just too much.

“No fucking way,” he announced. He doffed them angrily and then, looking around, tried to decide what to do with them. Spying a potted plant, he managed to hide the offending garment within the leaves. Then, he went back to his room and got dressed. In *his* choice of clothes: black jeans and a tight black tank.

As he ambled into the hall, he was, of course, immediately accosted by Lord Mink.

“Riki, have you forgotten what I told you to wear?” the Blondie demanded from the comfort of his chair where he sat, reading the Tanagura Quarterly.

“I’m not wearing that,” the mongrel replied, sitting down at the table and starting to eat as though nothing was wrong. “I’m wearing this.”

For a moment Iason was very quiet. Riki knew this quiet; this was the Blondie’s pre-rage quiet. A very unwelcome sort of quiet—one might even say a *disquieting* sort of quiet. A shiver ran down his back but he tried to maintain his composure, slowly chomping on a piece of toast.

“Go put on that outfit NOW,” Lord Mink whispered, his voice betraying his anger despite its softness.

“Fuck off.”

As soon as he said it, Riki knew it was a mistake. The Blondie stood up, and in a few quick strides, reached the table, yanking him to his feet. “It seems you want punished this morning, after all,” he hissed.

“Actually, no,” the mongrel protested.

Iason gave him a hard swat on the ass. “No?”

“Ow! No, I don’t want more punishment!”

“Then I suggest you obey me. Go put on that outfit, like I told you.”

“But it’s ridiculous!”

The Blondie smacked his ass again, harder.

“Ouch!”

“Obey me!”

“I don’t know where it is! I lost it!”

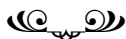
Lord Mink turned to Toma, who was watching the unfolding drama with wide eyes. "Toma, go fetch my counting stick."

"Yes, Sir."

"All right, all right," Riki exclaimed, alarmed at the mention of the hated cane. "I'll go put it on. I think I remember where it might be."

Iason, actually surprised that the mongrel had capitulated before he had to resort to real punishment, released him. "Now you're being smart," he said approvingly, as he straightened. "Go on, then."

The Blondie watched as Riki rushed out of the great hall, raising his brows in disbelief.



"THE COMMANDER HAS LANDED!" Toma announced, as soon as the transmission came in. "He's at the aerospace port now!"

Although all was in readiness at the penthouse, everyone rushed around in response to this news as though there were still a million things to be done. Everyone, of course, except Iason, who sat calmly in his chair.

He had been waiting all day for Riki to come into the great hall of his own volition, but the angry pet had remained in his room, sulking.

"Toma," Iason said, finally. "Send Riki to me."

"Yes, Master," Toma replied, with a slight bow. He practically ran to the mongrel's room, so excited about the Commander's visit that he was pumped full of energy.

The door was closed.

"Sir Riki," Toma called. "Master Iason wants to see you!"

Toma heard some grumbling noises within, and then, after a moment, Riki emerged.

When Toma saw him dressed so scantily, the low rise of his chain mail bikini revealing the hollow between his hipbones, it was all he could do to keep from laughing.

"What are you smiling about?" Riki demanded.

Toma shook his head. "Nothing. My lips just...naturally do that." He pursed his lips together, trying desperately not to smile.

"Yeah, I know. I look ridiculous."

“Actually you look...very sexy, Sir Riki.”

“Hmmm,” the mongrel snorted, pushing past him.

Riki had stayed in his room the entire day because he was angry. He felt humiliated at having to wear the stupid outfit and was equally pissed at himself for being so afraid of the Blondie’s cane.

When, at length, he finally came trudging into the great hall, head down, Lord Mink felt his heart stop. Riki looked simply irresistible so scantily attired, but his glum disposition was disconcerting.

“Come here, Riki,” he said softly, patting his lap.

The mongrel walked toward him with great reluctance, glowering.

“I’m glad to see you’ve dressed appropriately,” Lord Mink began.

“Yeah, this is real *appropriate*. I’d like to see *you* dressed so appropriately.”

Iason smiled. “Perhaps you shall, one of these days, if you are good.”

The mongrel brightened at this. “Hey, and *then* can I tie you up?”

Laughing, Iason pulled onto his lap, kissing his cheek again. “Pet. I adore you.”

“Then, how about letting me having my smokes back? I’m dying for them.”

“No, I told you: no cigarettes today.”

“Please? I really *really* need one.”

“No, Riki.”

“Aw, fuck.”

“And, it’s time to get you ready. The Commander will be here at any moment.”

“By ‘get me ready’ I guess you mean chain me up like an animal,” the mongrel muttered.

“For the duration of his visit, yes, you must be chained. Now, Riki, there’s something else we need to discuss.”

“What?” the mongrel asked suspiciously.

“About your inappropriate remarks to the Commander when he called here the other day: we never really dealt with that, did we?”

Riki sighed. He had been wondering if he was going to get away with what he’d said. Now he knew that he wasn’t.

“I’ve decided the Commander will be the one to determine your

punishment, as he was the one you insulted.”

“Whatever.”

“Very well; it’s time, Riki.” With that, the Blondie set him on the floor and then stood up, going to the cabinet to retrieve his chains. They were the special, gold-plated initialed chains that were made exclusively for Riki, although Riki did not seem to appreciate the extra effort he’d gone to on that count, or so it seemed to Iason.

In fact, the mongrel *had* noticed when, upon his return to the penthouse after running away, Iason had put him, not in the special chains, but in his *old* chains, the ones he had used when Riki first came to the penthouse. Riki had been strangely hurt by it, though he hadn’t said anything about it, at the time.

He gave an exaggerated groan when he saw the golden chains, however, even though privately he felt relieved when the Blondie chose *them*, rather than the old chains.

“Come now, pet,” Lord Mink scolded. “You have the finest chain-set in all of Amoi.”

“I guess I won’t be satisfied until you dip my urinal in gold, too. Only I guess you’d put *my* initials on that.”

Iason smiled at this, waiting for Riki to hold out his wrists.

Scowling, the mongrel allowed himself to be manacled and led to the corner of the great hall, where he was chained to the hall post. “I suppose I’ll have to eat on the floor again,” he remarked bitterly.

“No. I’ll have Toma or Katze take you to the nook, where all of you will have your meals for the duration of the Commander’s visit.”

“I thought I had to be chained up the whole time?”

“It will be enough then if you are wearing chains,” Lord Mink replied. He had already decided to relax the rules a bit, with regard to the mongrel’s restraints. Jupiter had said only that Riki was to be *chained* for the duration of the Commander’s visit: she had not specified that he must remain chained to the hall post. Although he knew this was what she probably intended, he didn’t want to restrict the mongrel’s movements any more than was absolutely necessary. He was anxious to restore their former relationship, and it was hard to do that when Riki was chained up.

“Oh, I get it. So you and Mr. Hotshot can have a private

candlelight dinner.”

“Riki—”

“Excuse me, Master Iason,” Ayuda interrupted, approaching the Blondie with a low bow. “Odi reports that the Commander will be here any moment. I must insist that, from this point on, I remain at all times near you.”

“Very well, Ayuda. Where is Toma? I could use a glass of wine.” Iason returned to his chair, pressing the small button on the table beside it, which sounded a pleasant chime throughout the penthouse. The relaxed, almost dismissive quality of the chime was completely incongruent with Lord Mink’s expectations regarding it: his personal attendant was to come running when the chime sounded, and, fortunately, Toma did so.

“Yes, Master?” Toma asked nervously, as he dashed out from the kitchen. Katze had warned him that he should, at all times, stay near the Blondie so that he would not have a reason to use the chime.

“Toma, some wine, please. The very best.”

“Yes, Sir,” the attendant replied, bowing. *The very best.* That would be...Icarian Amber? No, that was only top of the line for Lord Sami. This was the Mink household: the very best would be Aristian Red Emperor, of course—the finest wine in the entire Quadrant, and impossibly expensive. Toma felt proud to be pouring such a rare fine wine for his new Master; already he was wondering how he could casually work it into his next conversation with Sarius, without it seeming like he really cared, that Aristian Red Emperor had been Iason’s choice for his before-dinner potable.

He returned with the wine as quickly as he could while being cautious about his footing: it wouldn’t do to spill a drop of this particular wine. The Blondie took the glass, smiling to himself as he noted the dark crimson liquid and caught a whiff of its distinctive scent. He had intentionally not given Toma the name of the wine he had wanted in order to test him. Pleased that his new attendant had selected the correct label, he gave him a nod of approval.

“I assume everything is in readiness?”

Toma nodded. “I believe so, Master.”

“Good. You may dine with the others, when Tai is ready to serve

the household. For now, please remain here in the hall in case I require you.”

“Yes, Master,” the attendant replied, bowing so low that the Blondie had to smile. He was quite pleased thus far with Toma’s capabilities, as well as his unquestioning submission and deference.

“That will be all, Toma.”

“Yes, Sir.” The attendant backed away, standing against the wall near Ayuda.

“The Commander is in the building,” Freyn announced through the intercom. “He’s on his way up.”

Iason took a sip of his wine, feigning disinterest. In fact, his heart was beating so loudly it was as though a drum was pounding in his head. In moments he would be face to face with Commander Voshka Khosi: with Anori’s brother.

He knew the Commander was on the floor even before Freyn announced it. He could hear the guards outside greeting him with the traditional Amoian salute—beating their bracers against their shields.

When the door finally hummed open, admitting, first, a handful of the Commander’s personal retinue and then finally, the Commander himself, Lord Mink slowly rose to his feet.

In person, Voshka Khosi was larger than Iason would have guessed—as tall as himself. And there was no question that he was one of the most attractive men he had ever encountered. His dark hair flowed to his shoulders in shiny waves, striking against his fair, flawless skin. His ornate, elaborate armor was studded with jewels, and his cape spun around behind him as he walked into the penthouse.

Voshka took one look at him and unleashed a heart-stopping, mesmerizing smile. “At last we meet, Iason,” he said, his voice low and rich.

“Commander.” Lord Mink offered a gentle, deliberately unhurried bow of his head, daring then to meet Voshka’s gaze. He could immediately guess why the Commander had been so successful. Beyond his raw physical appeal, which was almost overwhelming, there was something intangibly alluring about the man, an intoxicating charisma that defied description but which demanded,

and immediately garnered, respect. Indeed, had Iason not been so preoccupied with his relation to Anori—and had his own heart not already been lost to Riki—he might have easily been rather smitten by the tall, proud warrior.

“Welcome to Amoi, and to my home. Please, come and join me here by the fire. What might I get you to drink?”

“It is a pleasure to be here, I assure you,” Voshka replied, smiling meaningfully. He nodded to Iason’s wineglass. “What are you having?”

“Aristian Red Emperor. It’s quite superb, I assure you.”

Voshka laughed at this. “I have no doubt of that; it happens to be my favorite wine.”

“Oh?” Lord Mink smiled, pleased. “Mine, as well.”

“Already...we have something in common.”

“Toma,” the Blondie said, glancing toward the attendant, who was merely waiting for his nod.

“I’ll get it, Sir,” Toma answered, rushing to the bar to fetch the Commander his drink. He was shaking from head to toe—completely overwhelmed by the presence of the famous military leader.

“Please, sit down.” Iason gestured to a chair near his own as Voshka approached him, continuing to smile.

“Again...my pleasure.”

“So, how was your journey?”

Both of them sat down.

“Uneventful, but pleasant enough. I am glad to be out of deep space.”

Lord Mink nodded. “I must confess, I rather dread space voyages.”

“It’s all that emptiness. You feel as though you’re going to be sucked into nothingness,” Voshka replied, crossing his legs.

“I must agree with you, although there is nothing quite like the approach to a planet.”

The Commander nodded. “Speaking of which, Amoi is breathtaking on approach, so golden, with just those few streaks of green.”

“The planet is mostly desert,” Iason explained.

“Your oceans are such a beautiful shade of blue-green. I find that

fascinating.”

“If I recall correctly, most of your oceans are covered in ice,” Iason replied politely, sipping his wine.

“Your wine, Commander,” Toma said softly, proffering the glass with trembling hands.

Voshka noted the boy’s nervousness and smiled; he was quite accustomed to eliciting such a reaction. He nodded, taking the wine. “Not completely,” he answered, turning back to Lord Mink. “Although it appears so from space.”

Iason surprised him then by speaking in fluent Alphazenian. “Yes. I recall during my last visit there, that the planet almost looked like a ball of ice.”

“You speak my tongue,” the Commander replied, raising an eyebrow and replying in Alphazenian, “and you’ve been to Alpha Zen? You’re full of surprises, my beautiful Blondie.”

“I learned it many years ago. I have frequent contact with your traders so I have many opportunities to practice it, although I fear my grammar must be appalling.”

“Not so. You speak perfectly,” Voshka protested. “I must confess, I’d much rather speak my own tongue than yours. No offense, but Amoian is one of the more difficult languages I’ve encountered.”

Lord Mink smiled tolerantly. “Yes, we have more verb conjugations than any other language in the galaxy.”

“Precisely. Damned verb conjugations.”

They both laughed at this. A sudden jangling of Riki’s chains diverted Voshka’s attention to the corner of the great hall, where the unhappy pet sat, glaring at him.

Riki had despised the Commander the moment he walked into the hall. He was far too good-looking, for one thing. He also hated the way Iason was so pleasant with him—flirtatious, even. Then, when they had begun speaking in some other language, it was all too much. Now he couldn’t even follow what they were talking about.

“Ah. Is this your pet?” Voshka asked, motioning toward Riki with his wine glass.

“Yes,” Iason answered, without turning.

The Commander laughed. “He doesn’t like me much, does he?”

The Blondie turned and, upon perceiving his pet's decidedly unfriendly countenance, sighed. "Riki!" he scolded sharply.

The mongrel only opened his eyes wide, as though wondering what he had done.

The Commander chuckled. "He's quite splendid. Is he Amoian? He doesn't look anything like the pets I've encountered here."

"He's Amoian," Iason replied, "although he was not bred in an Academy."

"You snatched him out of the wild, then? Trying to tame him?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Though the mongrel couldn't understand what they were saying, he got the distinct impression they were discussing *him*. He squirmed uncomfortably, wondering what sort of punishment the Commander was going to dream up for him.

"I see. I must say, he's quite remarkable. What a delightful pout! He likes to sulk, I take it? Personally, I prefer pets with a little spirit, I think I already told you as much."

"Yes. Ah...speaking of Riki, Commander, I do believe he insulted you rather rudely during our last conversation. So, I have waited for your arrival to decide on his punishment. What would satisfy you?"

"Oh dear," Voshka replied, with a mischievous grin. "You're asking me to decide his punishment? You've tapped into a weakness of mine, I'm afraid."

The Blondie waited, deciding not to respond to this rather intriguing comment.

"Although, to be honest, what I'd *really* like is to cart him off to my bed. Perhaps you'd let me administer the punishment in private? I have a favorite instrument of torture, if you get my meaning?"

Iason blinked at this, uncertain how to reply. He certainly did *not* want Riki in the Commander's bed, though he wasn't sure how to tell the man without offending him.

Fortunately, Voshka picked up on his discomfort immediately, arching his brows knowingly. "Hmmm. I see; you prefer *not* to share your pet in such a manner. Is it true then, what they say? You Amoians truly don't take your pets?"

Choosing not to reply to this, Iason lowered his eyes, staring at his

wine.

“Oh dear. I’ve quite embarrassed you, I think. Forgive me if I’ve wandered into some...taboo subject.”

Lord Mink shook his head. “It isn’t that. But,” he glanced at Riki, frowning, “that is, I prefer it if the punishment took place in my presence.”

“Oh? Then you’d like to join us, perhaps?” Voshka could not resist teasing the Blondie, who looked mortified at his comment. Laughing, the Commander leaned back in his chair. “You are so delightful, Iason. The look on your face just now! Priceless.”

“Then,” Iason began, uncertainly.

Voshka, realizing that Lord Mink was loathe allow him any type of sexual intimacy with his pet, saw an opportunity to leverage his position. He smiled again, taking another sip of his wine. “Then, suppose we come to a compromise. I confess, I *was* rather offended by your pet’s comment,” he replied, trying his best now to be serious, though, in fact, he had not been affected in the slightest by Riki’s insult, “and what would satisfy me is, as I mentioned, a night alone with him, to do my will. But, I will accept an alternative: a night in my bed...with you.”

The Commander took another sip of his wine, watching his reaction. For his part, Lord Mink managed to remain unreadable, although inside he was far from being unaffected by the offer. He’d promised Riki that he wouldn’t engage in sexual contact with Voshka immediately on his arrival, but on the other hand, there was simply no way he was going to grant the Commander his wish to take Riki to his bed. He would simply have to accept, and explain the matter to his pet later.

After a long moment, he raised his gaze, having come to his decision. “Very well,” he answered softly. “I will give you your alternative: one night with me.”

“Truly?” Voshka murmured, now plagued by an uncomfortable tightness in his groin. He uncrossed his legs, so excited by the Blondie’s acquiescence that he could hardly wait for nightfall. He glanced out the window, cursing the sun’s slow descent.

Lord Mink was fully cognizant of his sudden arousal, but remained

quiet, pretending not to notice.

Voshka laughed again. "I must confess, Iason—I am going to have a...*hard* time waiting."

The Blondie smiled slightly at his joke. "Toma," he said without turning. "Please bring us some more wine."

"Yes, Sir," Toma replied, rushing off to obey. Unfortunately, he was still so nervous that when he approached his Master with the bottle, he somehow stumbled, pouring wine all over Iason's beautiful clothes.

"Toma!" Lord Mink bellowed, standing up.

"I...I...am s-s-s-so...*sorry*, Master," Toma stammered, mortified.

"You *will* be sorry, when I have Katze give you a good taming," Iason replied, irritated.

Toma bowed his head, struggling to hold back his impending tears.

The Blondie sighed, turning to the Commander. "Please excuse me. I must change and, I'm afraid, take a quick shower first. I won't be but a moment."

"It is no matter; take your time," Voshka replied with a reassuring smile. He watched his host stride off to the bedroom to retrieve some new clothes and then head down the hall, with Ayuda at his heels.

With a mysterious smile, the Commander rose to his feet and followed him. His own bodyguard, Anders, kept to his side. When he reached the bath hall, he was stopped at the door by Ayuda.

"Lord Mink is engaged within," the bodyguard announced.

"Yes, I know. And I'd like to be engaged with him, so kindly step aside."

Ayuda was reluctant to do so, but felt he had little choice. At any rate, he did not suspect the Commander meant Iason any harm. He had watched the entire scene in the great hall carefully, and though he knew only a little Alphazanian, he was fairly certain that the two of them had come to some sort of an understanding. He allowed Voshka to pass, eliciting a smirk from the Commander, who turned to Anders before he entered the bath hall.

"We are *not* to be disturbed," he warned.

"Yes, Commander," Anders replied, bowing.

Voshka then continued on inside, the door humming closed behind him.

Anders and Ayuda exchanged a knowing look, each of them well aware of what would take place within.

Iason was already in the shower, and, as much as he hated to admit it, the Commander had managed to arouse him dreadfully; he now stood, vigorously pumping himself in an attempt to relieve his own need before joining the man again. He didn't have feelings in the least for the Commander, but he found him undeniably attractive. He was so preoccupied with this task and the spray of the water was so loud that he did not perceive the Commander's approach.

Suddenly, he realized that the shower door had slid open. He spun around, startled.

"Please. Don't let me stop you," Voshka remarked, his eyes glimmering with lust as he took in Iason's naked body.

Each of them eyed the other, equally impressed. From the Blondie's perspective, Commander Khosi had a body of a warrior king—perfectly chiseled, every muscle ripped in precisely the most alluring way.

Iason, of course, to Voshka, was nothing short of a sex god: he stood dripping wet, his immense organ throbbing visibly in his hand, his long, golden hair hanging in damp tresses.

Voshka took a step forward and flipped him around, seizing his wrists and pushing him up against the wall of the shower. He positioned the Blondie's hands up high where he wanted them, holding him captive for a moment.

"Don't move," he whispered before releasing him.

Lord Mink remained standing with his hands pressed against the wall, his body quivering.

"That's it," Voshka praised, enjoying an eyeful of the Blondie's backside. "Mmmm. What an ass! You're even more glorious than I had imagined, Iason!" The Commander took a moment to explore his body, first with his eyes and then with his hands.

"Oh, Voshka," Iason whispered, as the man touched him in all the right places.

"You're very responsive aren't you?" After a few minutes of



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Art by Tata

teasing, Voshka finally honed in on his erection, tantalizing him with a bit of slow stroking. “What a nice, hard cock you have. I bet you’d like to put this in my mouth just now, wouldn’t you?”

Iason merely closed his eyes, panting hard.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for that. Don’t worry, I’ll give you oral pleasure tonight that will make your head spin. You like a good suck, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the Blondie confessed, swallowing hard. “Yes, I do.”

“I’ll make you come so hard in my mouth you’ll see stars.”

“Oh, Voshka!”

“Do you like to be taken by force?” the Commander whispered, biting Iason’s neck.

Lord Mink gasped and shivered, thrilled.

“Let’s hope so, because I’m getting ready to fuck you,” Voshka announced, inserting a meaningful finger past his sphincter. “I simply must have you now; I can’t wait until tonight.” The Commander tried a second finger, and then began thrusting. “Do you like this?”

“Yes,” Iason admitted.

“Of course you do. You like a nice, hard cock in your ass, don’t you? You like to be controlled and commanded? I’m guessing you have little opportunity for that in your line of work, you being the big Syndicate boss and all. Tell me you like it.”

“Oh, Voshka!”

“I thought so. Now I’m going to fuck you. Spread your legs nice and wide for me, Iason.”

Lord Mink obeyed, beside himself with excitement, finding the Commander’s whole manner, his confidence, dominance and authority, extraordinarily arousing.

“Arch your back and get up on your toes—that’s it. Ah! What a glorious ass you have!”

Voshka continued to stroke him for a few moments more before releasing him. Next he spread Iason’s buttocks apart with both hands, hard, and dropped to his knees.

“I simply *must* have a taste of you first.”

Lord Mink cried out openly as the Commander flicked his tongue up inside him. The man explored him intimately and quite

enthusiastically for a few seconds with his mouth, nearly driving him to the brink. “Voshka! Voshka!” he whispered over and over, trembling uncontrollably.

The Commander finally stood up, wiping his mouth. “*The ones that quiver are the ones that deliver.* Have you ever heard that saying? You’re going to be an exceptional fuck. And now I know how to make you scream,” he hissed. “I’ll give you a good rimming tonight. What do you say to that?”

The Blondie shivered his response, unconsciously widening his stance.

Voshka caught the movement, grinning. “You can hardly wait for me, you’re so ready to be fucked.” He pressed his swollen member eagerly up against Iason’s portal. “Not as ready as I am, I think! I’ve wanted to do this from the moment I first laid eyes on you. I’m going to sink my cock deep inside you, Iason. Tell me you want it, first.”

Lord Mink closed his eyes, feeling almost drugged. “I want it.”

“Of course you do. Wiggle your ass back onto me—impale yourself on my cock,” the man demanded.

Iason did so, whimpering as he felt the Commander’s cock slither inside him.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Voshka pulled back on his hips, thrusting as he did so to achieve complete penetration. “Mercy,” he gasped, “you’re tight as a virgin!”

“Ohhhh!” the Blondie moaned.

The Commander had a very distinctive, intoxicating way of fucking: he wiggled his hips in a circle, first, and then began slowly thrusting, at times pausing for a moment when he was completely inside him before beginning the cycle again.

“Oh, Voshka!”

“Do you like a good hard fuck?” the Commander hissed, his voice thick with sex as he reached around to find Iason’s erection again. “Like *this*?” Next he rocked his body into the Blondie without restraint, grunting with each thrust.

“Harder,” Lord Mink whimpered, arching his back to take him even deeper.

The Commander nearly lost his seed then and there.

“*Harder?* Is that what you said?” Excited beyond bearing, Voshka proceeded with the most vigorous fuck he was capable of, unleashing a surprised howl of delight when the Blondie suddenly began contracting against him. “*What* are you doing? Oh...Iason! Keep doing that, that’s absolutely *glorious!*”

His own release imminent, Voshka began pumping him faster, hoping to hear the Blondie come first. “I want to taste you tonight,” he whispered. “Tonight, I’ll swallow you dry, Iason. Or perhaps you’d like to see how hard *I* can take it? Hmmm? Harder than this, I think? I’ll bet you can make me clutch the sheets!”

This promise managed to push the Blondie over the brink. He unleashed a low, throaty sex cry, which had the predictable effect of launching the Commander’s ascent. Both of them vocalized their pleasure with grunts and moans that were not altogether concealed by the sound of the pounding shower.

Outside, Ayuda and Anders exchanged glances again. Anders snorted, amused that the Commander had already managed to seduce the notoriously unattainable Blondie, Iason Mink. Ayuda, however, was not pleased. He had a feeling this new intimacy between the two great leaders would only lead to trouble.

He shook his head, preparing for a stormy night.

8

Iason's Punishment

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, EVEN AS IASON was still riding in the wake of his release, he was struck with a deep sense of regret—and guilt—over his sexual congress with Voshka Khosi.

The Commander was breathing hard, offering a few additional kisses to his bare shoulder, his hands still resting gently on his hips.

“Iason,” he groaned, “I do believe I may be in love.”

Lord Mink did not reply, hanging his head and closing his eyes. He was deeply perplexed by what had just happened. It was almost as if he had been under some sort of spell, one which was now completely broken. Although he had promised to spend the night with the Commander, he had done so only to prevent Voshka from touching Riki. So then why had he succumbed so easily to the man's advances? From the moment Voshka had stepped into the shower, Iason had felt as though he simply could not resist him. He found his attraction to the Alphazenian puzzling, especially because, at the moment, the allure had completely vanished.

“That was a mistake,” he said softly.

“A mistake?” Voshka reached out and pushed the Blondie's damp tresses aside, studying the side of his face. “But I *know* you enjoyed that?”

“I confess, I did. But...I should not have.” Unable to explain the turmoil of his mind, Iason fell silent.

“And why is that? Is it so wrong to enjoy carnal pleasures? Don't tell me it's true, the rumor about Blondies not engaging in sexual conduct?”

"It is forbidden," Lord Mink confirmed. This was not why he was upset, but he felt he couldn't share the true reason with the Commander. Already he was worried how Riki would react when he discovered that Iason had broken his promise.

"Yet I know for a fact that, despite this big prohibition you're worried about, some Blondies *do* engage in sexual congress."

"I won't argue with that."

"You're trembling," Voshka remarked, after a moment. "Or are you cold? Let's get dressed."

Lord Mink nodded again, anxious to get out of the shower and back into his clothes. There was a moment of strained silence as they dried off and donned their attire. Iason refused to look at the Commander, keeping his gaze averted.

Voshka smiled. "Are you blushing, Iason?" he teased.

The Blondie looked up at him, his blue eyes filled with such intense emotion that for a moment the Commander was rendered silent. He was puzzled because, although he knew the Amoians had bizarre beliefs and prohibitions regarding sexuality, he knew—from speaking with his brother, Anori—that the Blondies secretly engaged in coital pleasures of all kinds, without any sort of remorse. But perhaps this was the first time for Lord Mink, who was, apparently, the direct report to Jupiter, the digital deity who ruled Amoi and who imposed the rigid rules on acceptable sexual conduct.

Perhaps he was best served giving Iason a little space. After all, he had all night to win him over. The Commander smiled at this prospect, anxious for the "night" to formally begin.



"TOMA," RIKI WHISPERED URGENTLY. "Where's he going? That... General?" Riki strained against his chains, trying to see around into the hallway that led from the great hall, but found that his chains did not reach far enough.

Toma, who was quietly wiping up the wine from the floor, did not seem to hear him; in fact, the poor boy was close to tears, and petrified about the punishment promised by his new Master.

Although he had certainly been disciplined before, he'd never been tamed, though from what he'd heard he knew it was something he would not enjoy. Even more than that, he felt extraordinarily let down to have displeased his Master so soon after his arrival. Like most attendants, Toma had a certain "work ethic," and truly wanted to please his Blondie Master. To be yelled at in such a fashion, and to have so clumsily spilled wine all over Lord Mink on such an important day, was devastating.

Toma took it very hard.

"Toma!" Riki hissed frantically. He had deep suspicions about the Commander's intentions, and he was beside himself with jealousy, wanting to know what was going on. "Please! Tell me where he went!"

The young man looked up, gazing at Riki as if seeing him for the first time.

The mongrel was momentarily silenced by the look on his face. "Oh. Hey...don't pay any attention to what Iason said. He's a dickhead."

"He said I'm to be punished," Toma replied, his voice wavering.

"Um...sorry about that. That sucks—that asshole! Now will you PLEASE tell me where the General went?"

Without even thinking about it, Toma answered exactly what he saw. "He just went into the bath hall."

"But that's....that's where Iason is!" Riki cried. "Fuck! Toma... *please*, could you...I mean, I need to," now the mongrel changed his tactics, putting on an innocent face, "you know...*relieve* myself, and I want to do so privately, so could you release me?"

Not so easily fooled by Riki's ploy, Toma narrowed his eyes. "Not without Master Iason's permission."

"Please? I'll ask Katze to go easy on you!" Riki pleaded with him, but to no avail; the new attendant was smart enough not to accommodate his request.

Shaking his head, he stood up and started to head toward the kitchen.

"Wait! Couldn't you at least...go find out—"

At that moment Katze came into the hall, having heard Riki's shouting from the Observatory where he was checking to make sure

the hot tub was in order and a fire had been started.

"Riki," he scolded. "Keep your voice down. Iason won't have you carrying on in such a manner, as you well know."

"Katze," the mongrel pleaded, "please. I think that pervert is after Iason. Toma says he followed him into the bath hall."

Katze frowned at this, peering down the hall. Upon spying both Ayuda and the Commander's bodyguard outside the bath hall, he realized the veracity of Riki's claim. What was Iason doing in the bath hall? Even if he had gone to relieve himself, it was a bit odd that the Commander had followed him. But then, he *was* from Alpha Zen. Katze knew most Alphazeniens had a reputation for being sexually deviant.

"Can you go find out what's going on?"

Riki seemed so worried that Katze felt compelled to oblige him. "All right. But quiet down."

"Thanks, Katze!"

The eunuch made his way down the hall, stopping when he came to the bath. He nodded at Ayuda.

"Is Master Iason in there?" he asked.

"He is."

"Then...where is the Commander?"

A small snicker escaped Anders, which was not lost on Katze. He frowned, and then leaned closer to Ayuda. "They're *both* in there?"

"Yes," Ayuda replied, looking rather hesitant to share this information.

At that moment the unmistakable sounds of sexual exploration could be heard from within, Iason's moans and then...the Commander's grunting and groaning.

Katze felt an unexpected surge of anger toward Iason. Although he knew the Blondie had a right, as Master of his house, to engage in whatever activities he chose, it seemed nothing less than cruel to pair with the Commander so openly. Surely he had to know that Riki would be watching his every move, wondering what was going on.

Though he still felt annoyed with Riki for running away, Katze was not without a heart. And much of his anger with the mongrel had dissipated when he'd viewed Riki's punishment session, which was

being broadcast at all the Information centers on Amoi. The mongrel had taken a beating, no question.

Judging from the sounds that emanated from within the bath hall, one thing was certain: Iason was enjoying himself, no question.

“That bastard,” he whispered.

“Maybe you ought not tell his pet,” Ayuda suggested.

Katze shook his head. “He’ll find out soon enough. I just can’t believe....” He sighed. He would never understand Iason. Especially considering *who* the Commander was, and what had happened to Anori. Katze thought about this for a moment. Did that have something to do with it? Perhaps the Blondie was accommodating the Commander out of some sort of guilt?

Katze knew that he was not in a position to judge Iason. With a callousness and ingrained obedience that came from years of experience serving Blondies, he forced himself to put aside his own emotions regarding the situation; Lord Mink was Master of the house. What he chose to in the bedroom, or shower, or anywhere else, was his prerogative. He was a Blondie, and as such, Katze could not question his choices.

“Katze,” Ayuda began, with a deep breath. He was reluctant to bring up the matter but knew he had no choice. “I have a message for you from Iason. You’re to punish Toma.”

Katze was surprised at this. “Why?”

“He spilt wine all over Iason. That’s why he went to take a shower.”

“No shit.” Katze couldn’t resist a small smile, wishing he could have seen the Blondie’s composure spoiled in front of Commander Khosi.

“He says to give Toma fifteen or twenty strikes with a taming stick.”

Katze frowned, surprised at the severity of the punishment. But that was Iason. The Blondie had been humiliated in front of his guest and now wanted Toma to suffer. “All right.” He was just about to leave when Ayuda stayed him, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Make it fifteen,” he whispered.

Katze shot Ayuda a curious smile. He would have only given him fifteen strikes anyway—unless, of course, Toma resisted—but Ayuda’s

intervention on the new attendant's behalf was endearing.

"You do realize Toma is modified?"

Ayuda shrugged. "That makes no difference. I've heard good things about eunuchs, when it comes to sex."

"Hmmm." Katze returned the smile, giving him a wink. "Shall I tell him you said that?"

Ayuda punched him playfully on the shoulder. "Get out of here, you."

"Ow! Don't kill the messenger!" Katze rubbed his arm in mock anguish as he returned to the great hall.

Riki jumped to his feet. "What did you find out?" he asked breathlessly.

Katze grew serious, frowning as he tried to decide how to tell him.

"Oh fuck." The mongrel's face fell as he studied him. "You're shitting me, right?"

Katze sighed, shaking his head. "I'm afraid not. They're together."

Riki blinked a few times, unable to believe his ears. "You mean they're in the shower together?" His eyes gleamed with dark anger, his voice low and hard.

"Yes."

"You mean they're...*fucking*?"

Katze nodded.

"That bloody *liar*! Fuck!"

The mongrel was so angry, he began yanking on his chains in a ridiculously futile attempt to free himself.

"Calm down," Katze warned. "You're going to hurt yourself."

"I'll fucking kill them both!" Riki screamed, so furious that, at the moment, he truly meant it.

"Hush, Riki! If he hears you...."

"I don't give a fuck if he hears me or not! I hope he does, that lying, sadistic fuck!"

"Riki!" Katze was truly alarmed. Riki was yanking so hard on his chains that his wrists had begun to bleed. "Hey now, calm down. Please, Riki."

Toma and Tai both rushed into the great hall, and together with Katze they attempted to restrain the enraged mongrel.

“Fucking let me go!”

“Pet!” Lord Mink bellowed.

Riki froze for a moment, staring at Iason, who had hurried into the hall upon hearing the commotion, his hair still damp from the shower.

“*You*,” he spat, with disgust. “You fucking liar! I’ll never trust you again! I hate you!”

“Pet. You will not—”

“Don’t call me *pet*! I’d rather be dead than your pet! Sell me, kill me, I don’t fucking care! All I know is *I hate you*, Iason. I never want to see your face again!”

“Riki—”

“No, this isn’t a game! I’m dead serious!”

The Blondie quieted, for once rendered speechless by Riki’s tirade.

At that moment the Commander walked into the hall, stopping next to Iason.

Riki glared at the man for a long moment. He turned back to Iason, his face dark. “You *promised* me. I trusted you, but you lied. You fucked him. Now I know I mean nothing to you, and now...*you* mean nothing to *me*.”

Lord Mink noticed then that his wrists were bleeding. “Oh love,” he whispered, without even thinking about his audience, “you’re hurt.”

“Don’t call me *love*,” Riki snarled. “You don’t know what love is.”

Iason blinked at this, and then turned to Katze. “Go get the first aid kit.”

“I hope you don’t think you’re going to touch me. You’re never going to lay a hand on me again, not without a fight. I’ll not have your filthy lying Blondie hands anywhere on my body.”

“Riki, please,” Iason pleaded, moving towards him.

“Don’t touch me!” Riki screamed. “Don’t come near me, you fucking asshole!”

Now Voshka, having watched this scene with great interest, suddenly pieced together part of the mystery of Iason Mink. He realized then that the Blondie was sexually intimate with his pet, despite the fact that it was clearly forbidden on Amoi. This was

fascinating, given Iason's role as Head of the Syndicate. He saw, too, that his pet had strong feelings for him, and that through his seduction of Iason he had managed to complicate the relationship between the Blondie and his exotic mongrel pet.

He leaned forward to whisper in Iason's ear. "Let him brood on it for a spell," he advised. "Why don't we find somewhere quiet to talk, just you and I, until he cools down?"

"I trusted you," Riki repeated, his voice now breaking with emotion as his eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Riki," Iason whispered, wanting desperately to take him into his arms.

"Just leave me alone," the mongrel sobbed, sinking to the floor and burying his face on his arms.

Lord Mink instinctively moved forward again, crouching down beside him and placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Riki reacted to this as though his hand were acid, shrugging him off angrily. "I said *don't touch me!*" he snapped, his eyes dark and glimmering with tears.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Iason said softly, his own voice now wavering a bit.

"But you did. You *did* hurt me," the mongrel choked back. "And I'll *never* forgive you. I'll never trust you. It can never be the same between us now."

Katze returned with the first aid kit, immediately attending to the mongrel's wrists, which were both bleeding. He was careful not to look at Iason, afraid that he would be unable to conceal his own anger toward the Blondie.

"Riki," Lord Mink began again, but was silenced when Riki suddenly lunged for him. He instinctively backed away and stood up as Katze grabbed the mongrel, trying to restrain him. Ayuda stepped forward to help, for Riki was suddenly like a wild man, struggling and swinging.

"I'll kill you, both of you!"

At this remark, Katze gave him a hard slap across the face. "Hush," he hissed. "You'll get yourself killed with that talk."

"Good! I want to die!"

Anders frowned and stepped forward, one hand on his laser.

“Anders!” the Commander snapped, shaking his head disapprovingly at the worried bodyguard.

“But, Sir, he just threatened you!”

“He is no real threat to me. Stand down.”

“Yes, Sir,” Anders murmured, clearly unhappy with this command.

Voshka put a hand on the Blondie’s shoulder. “He’s not going to calm down until we leave,” he whispered. “Let’s go.”

Iason, perceiving his pet’s increased agitation when the Commander leaned forward to whisper in his ear, nodded. “Very well. Perhaps that would be best.”

“Yeah, go on!” Riki shrieked, as the two of them headed up to the Observatory. “Go fuck him some more. How about in the hot tub? That would be all cozy and fucking romantic, wouldn’t it?! *You prick!* I hate you, Iason!”

Lord Mink hesitated upon hearing these words, wanting to turn back to try and reason with Riki.

Voshka put a hand on his back to discourage this. “He’s too angry, Iason. He’s not going to listen to you now.”

The Blondie found the Commander’s advice reassuring. Somehow Voshka seemed to know exactly what was going on. He nodded, and they continued up to the Observatory, Riki’s anguished jeers following them all the way up the stairs.

Lord Mink was trembling by the time they reached the Observatory. Voshka looked at him, concerned.

“Let’s sit down. Are you...can I get you a drink?”

“What have I done?” Iason whispered.

“I’m afraid I owe you an apology. I didn’t realize you were... involved with your pet.”

The Blondie shook his head. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to understand. Your...Jupiter, isn’t it? Forbids your love, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. Then you are taking a big risk, I think?”

“I don’t care.”

Voshka smiled. “I always knew there was a rebellious streak in

you. Fascinating.”

“He’s furious with me.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“I’m not so sure.” Lord Mink gazed at him solemnly. “I promised him, you see.”

“You mean, you promised him that you wouldn’t sleep with me?”

“Yes. Or at least, not on your first night here.”

The Commander smiled, arching a brow. “Ah. But then you couldn’t resist me?”

Iason bowed his head, ashamed to concede that it was true.

“Well now. I’d love to think it was something particularly about *me* that drove you to break your promise. But,” he smiled mysteriously, “I’m afraid I may have some unfair assistance working for me.”

Lord Mink shook his head. “What do you mean?”

The Commander then pushed back his sleeve, pointing to a small gold-colored tattoo on his forearm. “This is G-wave modulator. It interacts with my chemistry to make me irresistible, at least when I’m aroused.” He grinned. “So I’m told, anyway.”

This revelation came as an extraordinary relief to the great Blondie, who had found the Commander’s ability to seduce him so easily greatly troubling.

“Once your pet calms down a bit, perhaps we can explain things to him. And, I assure you, if I had known...about your situation, I would have tried my best not to seduce you, though once I get aroused, there’s not much I can do. This thing gets automatically triggered when I get an erection.”

Lord Mink wasn’t sure what to think about this; in truth, he felt a little annoyed with the Commander, but envious at the same time, wondering if he might be able to obtain such an implant for himself.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Voshka laughed. “But I’m afraid it’s quite impossible. The scientist who designed this—a woman, in fact, quite lovely, too—is, unfortunately dead, and no one but her knows how it works.” Now he leaned forward. “And Iason, I can tell you this: you don’t need one. You’re irresistible, just as you are.”

Lord Mink visibly blushed at this compliment, an unusual reaction for the Blondie, who was rarely embarrassed by anything. He also felt

disconcerted to discover that another erection was upon him. “Can you turn that thing off?”

Voshka laugh was low and rich, and decidedly sexy. “I’m afraid not.” He reached out and rubbed a strand of the Blondie’s hair between his fingers, marveling over its silkiness. “But, Iason, what difference does it make now? Your pet is already angry with you. He suspects you’re engaged with me now anyway. So why not enjoy yourself? What do you gain by being miserable?”

The Blondie made no reply to this, shutting his eyes and trying to stave off his arousal. When the Commander leaned forward and began kissing his throat, he moaned, shuddering.

“Fates help me,” Voshka breathed. “You’re exceptionally erotic. Those low moans you make drive me wild.”

“Please stop,” Lord Mink begged. “I don’t want to hurt Riki any more.”

“I can’t stop now,” the handsome warrior whispered, as he traced his fingers down Iason’s back. “I’m sorry. It’s your fault, you know, for turning me on. I haven’t felt this excited since—well, not for a long time.”

“I wasn’t trying to arouse you.”

“Ah, but you did.” The Commander now began to deftly unfasten the diagonal of buttons on the Blondie’s tunic, sliding his hand beneath the fabric to his warm skin. “And now I want to continue.”

“Vosh, please,” Iason pleaded.

“Ohh,” Voshka breathed. “You’re finally calling me Vosh. I’ve been waiting for that. Come now, my beautiful, irresistible Blondie, a bit of release would do you good.”

“Please stop,” Iason gasped, as the Commander ran his hand down his abdomen and then over his trousers.

“You don’t want me to stop. Look at this—you’re completely erect. Besides, I can’t stop now, even if I wanted to.” Voshka stood up, tossing his cape aside, and began undressing. His eyes were wild with arousal as he looked down at him. “I need to fuck you. But this time, I want to taste you, my lovely Amoian.” As if to emphasize this, the Commander ran his tongue suggestively over his lips.

Lord Mink closed his eyes, trembling.

“Don’t fight it.” The Commander, now standing completely naked before him, held out his hand. “Get undressed. Let’s try out that hot tub. I suppose you’ve guess by now: Alphazeniens have a fetish for water. It makes us quite insatiable.”

A fetish for water. The image of Raoul with Anori in the hot tub now pressed into the Blondie’s mind. Suddenly Iason was struck with a thought. “This...implant. You are the only one, you said, with such a device?”

“Yes. Well, except for my brother, of course. He was the one who convinced me I had to get one.” Voshka smiled, remembering. “That was right after he seduced me, you see.”

Lord Mink was so surprised at his answer that for a moment he could not reply.

“Oh dear; I’ve quite shocked you, I can see. And you’re quite right to be so: we have the same prohibitions as you do, on that count. That’s why I decided I had to have an implant, too.”

Finally, after fifteen years of anger and resentment at Raoul, Iason finally understood: Lord Am had merely succumbed to Alphazeniens technology. The Blondie would not have been able to resist Anori Khosi, any more than he had been able to resist Voshka. That this revelation should come to him so many years later in the Observatory, the exact place where he had discovered Raoul’s illicit union with Anori, was so uncanny that he found himself feeling a bit light-headed.

“Those devices ought to be banned,” he whispered.

The Commander was ogling his body, looking eager to commence another round of coupling. “Come, Iason. Let’s get into the tub.”

Lord Mink turned his head away, refusing to look at him.

“Ah, I see you’re going to make this a challenge.” Voshka dropped to his knees, unfastening Iason’s trousers and yanking them down firmly to expose the Blondie’s rigid erection. “Then, perhaps I’ll taste you, right here.”

With that, he put one hand around the base of Iason’s shaft, and then proceeded to explore him with his tongue.

Iason unleashed a strangled groan. “Stop,” he commanded, suddenly seizing the man’s wrist. He gripped him so tightly that the

Commander was forced to release his hold.

Voshka sat back on his heels, perplexed. “Why are you resisting? You’re clearly aroused.”

“I already told you. I don’t want to hurt Riki.”

“But you promised an entire night with me,” Voshka reminded him quietly.

“A made a promise first to Riki,” the Blondie answered, “which now I’m going to remember.”

“Then, you’re breaking your promise to me?” Voshka demanded.

“Yes.”

The Commander sighed, and then stood up, tugging his trousers back on with obvious displeasure. “This is most vexing,” he grumbled.

“I apologize,” Lord Mink replied, fastening his pants and his tunic.

Voshka sat down on the divan, slouching down like a school boy as he sulked over his lost night of congress with the beautiful Blondie. “I must admit, I’m rather put out by it.” He turned to look at Iason, a slight smile turning the corners of his lips. “You really ought to be punished.”

The Blondie made no reply to this, somewhat encouraged by the Commander’s smile.

“You love your pet that much, then?” he asked, after a pause.

“Yes.”

Voshka shook his head. “This is a first. I confess, my ego is a bit bruised. Bested by a pet.”

Lord Mink smiled at him. “Surely you know it is not a matter of physical attraction. You saw how my body responded to you.”

“Thank you for your diplomacy.” The Commander sighed, allowing his head to fall back against the divan as he stared up at the blue sky. “I fell in love with a pet once,” he remembered sadly. “A pretty little thing from Aristia.”

“What happened to him?” Iason asked, relieved to get the Commander onto another topic.

“He escaped, actually. That was years ago.”

“And you never saw him again?”

Voshka shook his head. “I went to Aristia to look for him, but never did find him. I’ve been searching for him ever since—I can’t

quite seem to give up on him. It's funny: I still dream about him. He broke my heart when he ran away."

The two men continued to talk for awhile, the tensions easing between them. Eventually Voshka, who was of an agreeable disposition generally, fully forgave Iason for retracting his promise, deciding there was still a chance he could seduce him again. Perhaps it was too soon after their encounter in the shower; he would back off for awhile, and then try to charm the Blondie again later.

He could see that Lord Mink was still visibly upset over his pet's outburst and decided the best way to interest the Blondie was by speaking to this issue.

"Your pet—Riki? He's rather high-spirited, I take it."

"True enough," Iason laughed.

"Then, I wouldn't take to heart anything he said down there. He was angry; once his anger fades, you'll be able to win him over."

Lord Mink made no reply to this, his brow furrowed. In truth, he actually doubted his ability to garner Riki's forgiveness. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I am. Every man has his price. You just need to determine what it is he wants most."

"He wants his freedom," Iason replied. "But I can't give him that."

"Of course not," the Commander agreed. "But surely there is something else. Has he ever asked you for anything special?"

The Blondie considered the question. The only thing that came to mind was Riki's repeated requests to tie him up.

Voshka studied him. "What is it? You've thought of something, I think?"

"There is something," he conceded hesitantly.

"And...that would be?" the Commander prompted.

"He has, on several occasions, asked if he could tie me up."

A smile crept onto Voshka's face. "Is that so? And why do you suppose he would want to do that?"

Iason laughed. "Oh, I have no doubt, there: he intends to punish me, certainly, which is why I keep putting him off."

"Oh, my." The Commander had renewed respect for his mongrel rival and was suddenly seized with an extraordinarily provocative

idea. Excited, he sat up straighter. "Then perhaps you ought to let him have his way with you."

Lord Mink started to object, and then hesitated, considering. If it would win back Riki's heart....

Voshka watched him, his eyes gleaming. "You can take it," he whispered. "And you can make up your broken promise to *me* by letting me watch."

After mulling over the matter for a few moments, the Blondie finally agreed.

"Excellent," Voshka replied, trying to conceal his utter delight. "Now. I have an idea about how to approach your pet on this."



AKI WOKE UP FEELING EXTRAORDINARILY drowsy, having slept in later than usual. He had found it exceedingly difficult to fall asleep the night before in his excitement over his birthday. He crawled out of bed, too disoriented to remember the importance of the day, and padded to the kitchen, yawning.

Everyone was up, waiting for him, gathered around the table. When the boy made his entrance, still in his pajamas, hair wildly unkempt, he was greeted with smiles and laughter.

"Well now. Look who finally decided to get up," Omaki teased, softly.

Without replying, Aki crawled up onto his Master's lap, wanting to be held as the fog of sleep slowly dissipated.

"Good morning, my love," the Blondie whispered, pulling him close and kissing the top of his head. "And...happy birthday."

At this, Aki suddenly stiffened, remembering that it was, in fact, his birthday. Smiling, his eyes were drawn to the tiny ring sitting on the table. "Is that it?" he yelled.

The others laughed at his excitement. "Yes," Omaki replied. "That is it."

"Play it," Aki demanded, beside himself with excitement.

"Very well. Now remember, Aki, this will only play *once*. Are you quite sure you're ready?"

The boy nodded furiously, eyes wide. His heart was beating wildly. He was about to be addressed by Jupiter!

"Then, here we go." Lord Ghan picked up the ring and gave it a good whirl. For a moment, the ring appeared to be a golden sphere, and as the spinning slowed and the ring began to settle back down on the table, it suddenly lit up, projecting a hologram above the table.

Aki gasped at his first—and probably only—glimpse of Jupiter, who seemed to be looking directly at him.

"Aki, number U-004M, I greet you. Today you are formally recognized as a citizen of Amoi. Aki, you have been given special status: you are Unclassified. You are now the ward of Iason Mink, who will supervise the remainder of your education. As a citizen, you are expected to conform to all laws articulated in the General Code and to uphold your designated station with dignity, with special attention to Sections U001-900 and E499-700. You are to be admitted to the Eos Academy for Elites for formal training in an apprenticeship of your choosing. You are eligible to apply for admission into the Academy of the Amoian Guard on your twelfth birthday, should that option appeal to you. As an Elite, you are granted all the privileges that come with my most favored class of citizens. Congratulations."

After this brief appearance, the hologram flickered and then abruptly disappeared, leaving only the ring, now motionless, on the table.

Aki was so excited he could barely speak. "Special," he breathed. "Jupiter said I'm special!"

"Of course you are," Omaki whispered, trying to hide his profound disappointment. He had felt his heart sinking when Jupiter gave him his identification number—Unclassified. He had hoped for a pet class of some type; but then, when Jupiter spoke of Iason and the Academy, he realized that Aki could not enter the Elite Academy with a pet identification. So, an Unclassified number made perfect sense. But then, when Jupiter announced that Aki was an Elite and eligible for military training, he felt all his hopes fading away.

Aki was to be an Elite, not a pet. He frowned, puzzled. But then, why was he Unclassified? He pondered this for a moment, and then

decided that this classification, in fact, worked to his advantage. Perhaps this meant Aki *could still become* a pet! In his heart, he knew that no Elite had ever subsequently of his own volition choose to be a pet and that, therefore, it was extremely unlikely that Aki would become his pet, but he couldn't bring himself to face this reality. He clung to the hope that, somehow, Aki would choose to come back to him, would willingly decide to be his pet, for he couldn't bear the thought that it would not be so.

Aki let out a howl of protest as the Blondie unconsciously begun to hold him closer, squeezing a bit too hard. "You're *suffercading* me," he complained.

Omaki smiled sadly. "I am sorry, Commander Aki."

Aki beamed at this appellation. "Jupiter says I can join the Amoian Guard!"

"Yes," Lord Ghan conceded, trying his best to hang onto his smile.

"And...she says I'm a Leet!"

Ru, Kahlan, and Enyu all laughed at this.

Congratulations, Aki," Ru laughed. "You'll be a wonderful Leet."

"Yes, congratulations," Kahlan said, smiling. "So that was Jupiter, huh? What did you think of her?"

"She was...*X-tordernary*," Aki whispered.

"It truly doesn't play again?" Enyu asked, puzzled by the concept.

Omaki shook his head, picking up the ring. "No. One time only. Hold out your hand, Aki."

The boy did so, and Omaki slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of his left hand.

"Don't ever lose this. It contains your identification chips, and from here on all records concerning you will be stored with your number." The Blondie couldn't help but notice that Jupiter had chosen to give him a finger ring—yet another sign that he was destined for something other than pethood. Only Elites wore their identification in the form of finger rings.

Aki nodded solemnly, admiring the shiny iridescent ring for a few moments. He then seemed to notice for the first time the scroll that was also on the table. "Is that my Certificate?"

"Yes," Lord Ghan confirmed. "Would you like to open it?"

Aki nodded, and the Blondie handed him the sealed scroll. Aki held it for a moment with reverence, and then carefully broke the seal. The Certificate replicated in writing what Jupiter had told him in his birthday greeting, acknowledging him formally as a citizen of Amoi and reiterating his status and privileges. It bore Jupiter's stamp, three interlocking triangles of gold, which glimmered on the page.

"On my planet," Kahlan remarked hopefully, "we have a special dessert to celebrate birthdays."

"Is that a hint?" Ru demanded, grinning. "But I just made an Aristian chocolate cake."

"But...it's gone now," Kahlan pointed out.

"I want a cake for my birthday!" Aki yelled, excited.

"Goodness, Aki," Omaki scolded. "Do you think you can ask in more polite fashion, the way a newly acknowledged citizen would?"

Aki immediately put on an air of such dignity and reserve that it was all the others could do to keep from laughing.

"Might I please have a cake, on this, my birthday, Ru?" he asked, solemnly.

Kahlan bit his lip at this and snorted.

Ru bowed. "I suppose that could be arranged, Sir Aki. And what type of cake would you like?"

"Aristian Chocolate Cake!" Aki yelled.

"Aki," Omaki sighed, but couldn't help smiling at the boy's excitement.

"But I just made one," Ru protested.

"We did eat all of it," Enyu pointed out.

"Wouldn't you prefer something different?"

"No! Aristian Chocolate," Aki proclaimed, and the others nodded in agreement.

Ru shook his head. "Very well. Aristian Chocolate it is. But first, are you ready for breakfast, Aki?"

"Yes, please."

"Now," Lord Ghan suggested, as Ru rushed to bring the boy his food, "what do you say that today we go out somewhere, just you and I, wherever you want?"

"Anywhere I want?" Aki replied, eyes widening.

“Yes. That is, anywhere on the planet.”

“Oh,” Aki replied, his hopes to visit one of the border planets dashed. He thought for a moment, his brow furrowed as he contemplated the choices.

Omaki waited, wondering what the boy would pick, and trying to keep a smile on his face, though he felt as though his heart was breaking. This was his last day with Aki, the last day before his young would-be pet was sent to live with Iason, and part of him feared that this was, in fact, the end of his dream; that, little by little, the boy would begin to drift further away. He closed his eyes, wishing he could hold Aki, just so, in his arms, forever young, and forever his love.



“I CAN WALK,” YUI PROTESTED, as Raoul carried him inside his suite.

“Hush,” the Blondie replied, though he couldn’t help but smile. He was thrilled to be finally bringing Yui home, now fully restored.

Yui had gone through pure hell, enduring every one of the prescribed Acceleration treatments despite their agony and refusing his repeated suggestions that he abandon the treatment.

Lord Am was so impressed with Yui’s courage that he was determined to make it up to him, planning to pamper him in every way possible. He would even *cook* for him, he decided. Then he frowned. He wasn’t precisely sure *how* to cook. But then, how hard could it be? He’d call up the holographic chef for help.

Pixie darted into the room, so excited about their return that he began playfully running around Raoul, batting at his pant leg and mewing.

“Pixie,” Yui exclaimed. “Did you miss me?”

As if on cue, Pixie mewed loudly, looking up with wide, round eyes.

Yui giggled. “Were you a good kitty?”

“No, he wasn’t,” Lord Am replied grumpily. It had taken the housekeepers a good hour to clean up the mess made by the tiny ball of fur. “He knocked everything over and broke my Ghevoenichi vase.”

"Is that true, Pixie?" Yui scolded, shaking his finger at the tiny feline. Pixie raised a paw as if to bat the proffered reprimand finger.

Raoul placed Yui on the divan, and the kitten immediately leapt up onto his lap, purring loudly.

"Naughty kitty," Yui whispered sternly, though it was hard to frown, especially when the kitten seemed to deliberately settle down on his new organ.

"He *is* a naughty kitty," Raoul agreed. "And perhaps I need to punish *you* for allowing him to misbehave."

"But," Yui protested, opening his eyes wide, "I'm still quite weak."

Lord Am smiled at his ploy. "Then perhaps I'll put off your punishment. But as soon as you're completely healed, I'm turning you over my knee."

"What? That's not fair," Yui pouted playfully.

"I'll be the judge of what's fair," Raoul growled, gifting him with a stern look.

"Ow," Yui winced, when Pixie dug a claw into his trousers.

The Blondie picked the kitten up, tossing him to the floor. "That's my territory," he announced, eliciting another giggle from Yui.

"How does it feel? Does it still hurt?"

"Not really. Just when he clawed me."

"Have you felt anything yet?"

Yui shook his head, looking a little concerned.

"Don't worry. Heiku says it will come naturally—we can't rush it." He leaned closer, kissing Yui on the forehead. "Are you hungry? I'll make you brunch."

"You'll *make me* brunch?" Yui repeated suspiciously.

"What? Surely it can't be that difficult. What would you like?"

"Umm," Yui hesitated, trying to think of the most innocuous thing possible. "Maybe...toast?"

"Toast it is. And I'll make you eggs and bacon, and hotcakes, too. How does that sound?"

"Yummy," Yui admitted, his stomach growling at the thought. But could his Master actually cook?

"Now you just lie here," Lord Am ordered, propping his legs up on the divan, "and call me if you need anything."

Yui nodded, smiling as the immense Blondie made his way to the kitchen. He put his hand over his mouth, stifling a giggle when he heard a good deal of crashing and cursing. Pixie jumped back on his lap, insisting on being petted.

In the kitchen, Raoul couldn't find the switch for the holographic chef, and rather than humiliating himself by asking Yui where it was, he decided to figure things out on his own. He found a basket of eggs in the refrigeration unit and so cracked them—all thirty—into a bowl. He peered at the immense mass of yellow liquid, wondering if he had made too much. Next he dug around until he found a skillet, slamming it onto the stovetop. Then he stared at the stove, puzzling over how to turn it on.

"On," he commanded.

Nothing happened.

"Eggs," he tried.

In the great hall, Yui was snorting furiously as he heard his Master talking to the stove.

Raoul frowned. "Breakfast?"

He studied the stove, and then realized there was a digital panel on the front. So, *not* voice-activated. "Piece of junk," he mumbled, as he started pushing random buttons.

All the burners came on at once, startling the poor Blondie. He cursed, pushing the "o" button repeatedly as though this would somehow turn the stove off. When this failed to accomplish his objective, he decided to ignore the additional flames and go ahead and cook his eggs.

He had poured the entire bowl into the skillet before he realized there were far too many eggs to fit. The eggs spilled all over the stovetop, running down the front of the oven and into the open flames, sending up great spirals of smoke.

"Blast," he cursed, staring at the mess and feeling a bit desperate.

"Push the red button—the one that says, *Off*," Yui suggested.

"What are you doing up?" Lord Am demanded, though he quickly took Yui's advice. The additional flames immediately disappeared and a fan came on, sucking the smoke up into a vent.

"Master, you don't know how to cook."

Although the Blondie hated to admit it, he knew that Yui was right. He stared at the stove, a bit appalled by the mess he'd made. "I'll call housekeeping," he decided, and then turned and picked Yui up, carrying him back to the divan. "And I told you to stay put, didn't I?"

"I had to make sure you didn't burn the Tower down," the boy retorted with a grin.

"Hmmm. I had things under control."

"It didn't look that way to *me*."

Raoul leaned forward, so that his forehead touched Yui's. "Are you challenging my authority?" he demanded, with mock sternness.

"No, Master," Yui said solemnly.

"Good. Because if you're well enough to walk into the kitchen, you're well enough to be punished."

"Am I well enough to go the party tomorrow?" Yui asked, anxiously. He had been badgering his Master about it for the past few days, but the Blondie hadn't made up his mind on the issue.

Raoul sat back, considering him for a moment. "I suppose so," he conceded, with a smile.

"Thank you, Master," Yui cried, leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek. He was quite excited about the party, despite feeling admittedly jealous of Lord Mink. He so rarely had the opportunity to socialize with other attendants or pets and was truly looking forward to the event. Additionally, he wanted to keep an eye on his Master when he was around Iason—not that he could really *do* anything. Yui had worried that he would be forced to stay at home while Raoul went to the party, left alone to go out of his mind with worry and jealousy.

"I'll call the kitchens, and we'll have some food sent up. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful."

"All right then." Raoul got up and went to the communications center, smiling at Yui's excitement. His kiss had aroused him, and now he wondered how long he would have to wait before Yui began to feel sexual arousal as well. He was so anxious to take him to his bed that he could hardly keep his hands off the young man, and his fingers trembled as he put in the call.

Soon, he thought. Very soon.



RIKI WENT THROUGH THE FULL GAMUT of dark emotions, from rage, to hurt, to grief, and then back to rage again. He couldn't believe that Iason had broken his promise. He sat, head on his arms and his knees pulled up to his chest, wishing the world away.

Only when Toma was punished was he momentarily lured out of his own despair. Katze led the new attendant to the table there in the great hall, whipping the taming stick out from his sheath.

"Put your palms on the table. You can keep your pants up. I don't want to do this, but I have no choice. You've got to learn to be more careful, Toma."

"I know. I was so nervous with the Commander watching, I don't know what happened!"

"I understand. But spilling wine all over Master Iason, especially *that particular* wine, was perhaps the worst thing you could do. Hurry up, now; let's get this over with. Palms on the table, Toma."

With great reluctance, Toma obeyed, startling when he heard Katze smack the taming stick against one hand.

"You'll take fifteen strikes. Do not move from this position, or I will add five additional strikes," Katze warned.

When the first strikes came Toma blinked back tears, unable to believe how much it hurt. He bit his lip, trying not to cry out. But it was not long before he vocalized his anguish with every strike.

Katze gave him a hard taming, not even attempting to hold back on the strikes. He had learned, back when training Daryl, that sparing his arm only led to further punishment: Iason would call him on it, re-administering the taming himself and forcing Katze to endure a few punitive strikes on top of it. But he stopped at fifteen, glad that Toma had managed to hold his position for the duration of his discipline session.

"That's it. You've taken your punishment. You may rest in your room for one hour," Katze said softly.

Sniffing, Toma scurried from the hall, his face red from emotion and shame.

Riki found Toma's punishment one more reason to be angry with Iason. Everyone made mistakes sometimes: it seemed to him very cruel to punish the new attendant simply for being *clumsy*. He was so deep in thought he did not notice when the Commander came toward him, stopping a safe distance away and then leaning nonchalantly against the wall.

"What the fuck do you want?" Riki demanded, startling when he finally saw the man.

"I'm here as a messenger of sorts. Iason has sent me here to... negotiate on his behalf."

The mongrel frowned, momentarily at a loss for words. "I don't negotiate with...dickheads," he replied finally.

Voshka smiled. "Indeed. A wise policy: but perhaps you should hear the terms first."

Riki was utterly mystified by the situation and simply glared at the Commander to hide his confusion. Negotiations? Terms? What was Iason up to now? What game was this?

"Iason has conceded that you are owed some sort of compensation for your grievance," Voshka continued. "So, he has agreed to submit to your punishment."

Riki blinked, not quite daring to believe what he was hearing. Slowly, he rose to his feet. "To my punishment," he repeated.

The Commander smiled. "I thought that might garner some interest. Yes. He has agreed that you are entitled to administer the punishment of your choosing—within reason. I will be observing to make sure things don't get too far out of hand."

Riki's eyes narrowed at this. "*You* will be observing?"

"Yes. Now," Voshka lowered his voice a bit, "you needn't worry. I have no intention of interfering with your agenda." He smiled, his eyes shining.

Katze and Tai, who were there in the hall, exchanged glances of disbelief at this conversation.

"Hmmm." Riki considered the offer, feeling very tempted to accept, his eyes locked with the Commander's. Whether it was his proposition or the man himself, the mongrel suddenly felt strangely attracted to him, eyeing him openly.

Voshka noted his surveillance, intrigued. His gaze lowered to Riki's groin and, detecting a slight movement there, offered him a meaningful smile. "Of course, if you *want* me to interfere—in whatever way—I would be happy to assist you. I have a taste for discipline, I must confess."

Now Riki's lips curled into a slow, wicked smile that matched the dark gleam in his eyes.



IASON WAS FACEDOWN ON THE BED in the Master bedroom, his wrists and ankles manacled firmly to the bedposts. He was completely naked, his beautiful pale skin appropriately bared for punishment. Riki paced in front of the bed, now dressed—at his insistence—in black leather pants and a tight black tank. He was free of his chains and wielded a C-1 kasey, a long, thin, cane-like whip that he tapped threateningly against his leg.

Commander Khosi sat comfortably in a chair in the corner of the room, watching, a devious smile curling his lips.

After a few moments of pacing, Riki stood before the Blondie, hands on his hips. "Do you have anything you'd like to say before I punish you?"

"Yes," Iason replied. "I *am* sorry, Riki. I should not have broken my promise to you."

The mongrel stiffened at this, crossing his arms on his chest. "No, you shouldn't have," he agreed. Then he leaned down, looking into Iason's eyes. "But now you'll pay for it, won't you?"

"Riki," the Blondie began.

"Silence!" Riki commanded. "The time allowed for speaking is past. For the next few hours, you'll do as *I* say. Is that understood?"

For the next few hours? Lord Mink strained to see if Voshka was still in the room. Surely the Commander would not allow things to carry on that long, he reasoned, forcing himself to relax.

Riki was now teasing him with the kasey whip, dragging the tip of the thin, flexible rod the length of his body, and then between his buttocks and along the inside of his thighs. After a few long minutes

of this, he stopped, enjoying the sight of Iason so vulnerably positioned, waiting to be punished at his hand. It was a moment he had fantasized about countless times, and the mongrel was determined to savor every second.

He squeezed the handle of the whip, his anger now channeling into his arm. Iason *did* deserve to be punished—*thoroughly*—not only for breaking his promise, but for all the times he'd made him suffer. Now, finally, he had a chance for some payback.

He would show no mercy.

The Commander watched Riki's performance, privately applauding the mongrel's patience. The pet knew just how long to wait in order to build up anticipation and make Iason squirm a bit first. And although the Blondie did not technically "squirm," he was sure that Lord Mink at least felt *some* apprehension about what was coming.

In fact, the Blondie was utterly fascinated with Riki's whole demeanor. Since the punishment had not officially commenced, he was not in any sort of pain, and he couldn't help but be intrigued by a side of his pet he had never before seen. Perhaps he would even enjoy being punished.

This last thought was quickly discarded once the punishment actually began. Riki rained down a series of brutally hard strikes to his buttocks and thighs, the thin whip tearing into his skin. Iason frowned, finding it quite unpleasant. Although he made no sound, he certainly felt each and every strike; moreover, as the punishment continued, the pain seemed to get exponentially worse—there was, indeed, a cumulative effect he hadn't anticipated. He clenched his muscles against every strike, hoping for a quick end to the torment.

Riki was delighted. Although the Blondie didn't cry out, it was obvious he was in pain by the way his muscles twitched and quivered. He poured two years of suffering and built-up resentment into his arm, giving his Master a sound, merciless whipping.

Finally he stopped, mostly because his arm had begun to cramp. "Did you feel that?" He crouched down before Iason to look him dead in the face. "Yes, I think you did. However, I hope you don't think your punishment is over yet." He leaned over, nuzzling Iason's cheek

before whispering in his ear. “No, we’ve only just begun.”

With that he stood up, disappearing from Iason’s view for a moment before returning with a long, ominous-looking paddle.

The Zephyr 2000 Burn.

Lord Mink stared at the implement, hoping that his pet only meant to tease him with it. But Riki had other plans. He flipped the unit on, switching it to G-wave emission.

“Riki, I hope you don’t think you’re going to use that on me.”

“What did I tell you?” the mongrel demanded. “Shut the fuck up!”

“Vosh,” Iason tried next. “Please. This is going too far.”

“Oh, I’m quite looking forward to a good paddling,” the Commander replied, leaning back in his chair and spreading his thighs in a relaxed, semi-erotic manner. “No, I’m not going to interfere. This is splendid.”

Riki shot Voshka a grin, and the Commander rewarded him with a wink.

“Do you hear that?” the mongrel taunted. “Your loverboy wants to see you suffer, too.”

“I could call Ayuda,” Lord Mink threatened. The bodyguard had, in fact, been most disapproving of the whole punishment scenario, asking Iason repeatedly if he was absolutely certain he was willingly submitting to it.

“Go ahead,” Riki replied. “We both know you won’t. That Blondie pride of yours would never allow it.”

Iason had no reply to this; his pet was right—he couldn’t call for Ayuda to come and release him. Then everyone in the household would know he had caved, and his authority would be forever destroyed. It was bad enough that he was submitting to this ridiculous discipline session, he couldn’t beg for mercy, on top of it. He was a Blondie. Blondies didn’t beg. No, he had no choice but to take whatever Riki had in mind for him, no matter how unpleasant it felt.

He waited, his body tensing up as Riki began pacing again. His eyes were locked on the paddle: he had never been struck by such a fearsome implement, and he was, in truth, a bit anxious about it.

Finally, the mongrel stopped pacing, and with a mighty swing,

gave the Blondie his first whack. Iason understood immediately why the paddle was called “the Burn,” for he felt as though his ass was on fire, his cheeks hot and throbbing from the impact of the paddle.

“I think you felt *that*,” Riki remarked tauntingly. He spun the paddle in the air, catching it and then bringing it down for a second whack.

This time Lord Mink gasped.

“What was that?” Riki leaned closer. “I do believe you made a sound that time.”

The Blondie opened his mouth, his lips quivering ever so slightly.

“Or...perhaps I’m mistaken. Let’s see.” Riki swung again, eliciting another sharp gasp from the Blondie.

Thrilled, the mongrel twirled the paddle in the air again, but this time dropped it. “Fuck,” he grumbled, glancing at Iason to see if he had noticed his error.

He heard Voshka laughing and he turned around, glaring at him.

The Commander raised a hand, shaking his head. “Forgive me,” he apologized. “It was...quite funny, however—the look on your face. Please, continue.”

Iason was simply in too much pain to find the mongrel’s fumble amusing. He braced himself for more punishment and was not disappointed: Riki continued with the paddling until the Blondie was almost prepared to plead for mercy.

Lord Mink’s ass and thighs were so red that Riki *almost* felt sorry for him. But then he remembered the Blondie’s transgression and hardened his heart. He wasn’t finished with Iason yet. No.

Now he would make him suffer in *other* ways.

Next, he retrieved the G-strap, flipping it on with a flick of his wrist, the sharp crack actually startling Iason. Riki smiled at this, cracking the strap a few times for effect. “Now let’s see how *you* like the G-strap, Mr. Blondie.”

With that, he proceeded to give Lord Mink a thorough strapping. Though the Blondie still refused to cry out, his hands were now clenched in fists, and he released a shocked gasp with each acquaintance with the strap. Beyond the pain, the G-wave emissions from the paddle and the G-strap were having their intended effect,

and Iason was now uncomfortably, incontrovertibly aroused.

Riki shut off the G-strap, throwing it aside. "I'm ready for you now, Vosh," he announced, smiling at his Master's surprised expression.

The Blondie frowned when he saw the Commander approach his pet, and then put his arms around him from behind, smoothing his hands up over Riki's thighs to his crotch.

"What are you doing?" Lord Mink demanded. "Vosh, how dare you touch my pet!"

"Oh, this is part of your punishment," the Commander replied, with a wicked grin. "Your pet asked me to participate, and I agreed."

Riki smiled triumphantly at Iason, dramatically unzipping his pants and guiding Voshka to his waiting erection.

"Stop...stop this at once," the Blondie hissed, furious.

"You're not in a position to be making demands," the mongrel replied, gasping when the Commander began openly fondling him, kissing his throat as he did so. Riki closed his eyes, enjoying the sensations and, most of all, Iason's transparent anguish.

The Blondie watched jealousy, feeling helpless. This wasn't at all what he had in mind, and now he felt extraordinarily incensed with Voshka, who he felt had, somehow, tricked him. To make matters worse, he was now painfully aroused, the performance before him only increasing his discomfort.

"All right, Commander," Riki ordered, giving his Master a little grin. "Get on your knees and suck me."

Voshka obeyed, smirking at Iason as he knelt down before his pet and began to pleasure him.

At first, Riki deliberately exaggerated his reactions to infuriate Iason, but it wasn't long before his moans were genuine.

"Holy fuck," he whispered, allowing his hands to run through the Commander's soft hair.

"Stop this!"

Riki gazed at the Blondie through half-closed eyes. "How does it feel, Iason," he whispered tauntingly, "watching me get pleased by someone else? Perhaps now you understand...how *I* felt."

Lord Mink remained silent, watching his escalating excitement and finally, his climax, through jealous eyes, finding this part of the

punishment more of a torment than all that had gone before.

But the punishment didn't end there; for several hours, Riki and the Commander amused themselves by tormenting the Blondie sexually. They released his ankles from the manacles and forced him to get onto his knees, both of them fondling him and licking him, arousing him *almost* to the point of orgasm and then abruptly stopping. Riki would then punish him with a few more strikes of the G-strap, and they would start again, frustrating Iason so dreadfully that he finally pleaded with Riki for release.

"You want me to let you come? But...how would that be punishment?"

Now Voshka, who had been enjoying the discipline session immensely, suddenly decided that he was finished playing. He undressed, kneeling behind Lord Mink and, without any preamble, began fucking him.

"I didn't say you could fuck him," Riki objected, pouting.

"The game's over," Voshka replied. "I have my limits, too."

"Fuck him *hard*, then," the mongrel grumbled.

The Commander was happy to oblige him while Riki continued to fondle Iason, eliciting rasping cries from the tormented Blondie, who was now desperate for release.

This time, though, the mongrel miscalculated, failing to stop before the Blondie reached his critical point. Groaning, Lord Mink finally expelled his pent-up seed, just as Voshka ejaculated.

"You weren't supposed to come," Riki muttered, wiping his hand on the bed.

With a moan, Voshka finally withdrew. "All right, Riki. I think...that's punishment enough."

The mongrel sulked a bit at this, having quite a different view on the subject.

"Please, Riki," Iason pleaded softly. His entire backside was throbbing, and he knew that he simply could not take any more.

Thrilled that his Master had finally begged him for mercy, the mongrel finally relented. "Yeah, all right. But," now he stood up, retrieving a pack of smokes that he had finally found after rummaging through Iason's dresser, "I'm taking these back now, and I'm going to

have a smoke before I untie you.”

The Commander dressed in a leisurely fashion, giving Iason a wink as he did so. “I must confess, I’ve rarely spent an afternoon more pleasurable.”

Lord Mink only frowned, feeling more than a bit annoyed with his handsome houseguest.

Riki yawned, stretching his arms. “I’m starving. When’s dinner?”

Distracting Vosh

GUY CAUGHT HIS BREATH WHEN saw the familiar roadhugger. As he approached, even through the falling snow, he could tell that it was Kei's, and from the snow piled on it, that it had most definitely been sitting there for days.

"Kei!" He pulled up alongside the vehicle, trying to peer through the darkened windows, but was unable to see anything. He jumped off his bike and punched in the codes on the entry panel, anxiously waiting while the door lifted open.

But Kei wasn't inside. Frowning, Guy looked toward Dana Burn, wondering why his lover had stopped there. Had he gone inside the old rebel shelter? If so, why had he parked so far away?

He got back on his bike and sped towards the entrance, ignoring his hunger and weariness. He had been searching for Kei for days without food or rest and was now completely frantic. He knew it was unlike him to disappear without at least telling him where he was going. More disturbing than this was the fact that Kei had disappeared the same day that Riki had run away from the Blondie Iason Mink. Guy, anyway, was convinced that the events were somehow related.

If he was right, Kei had gone out in search of Riki in order to secure the reward Iason had posted. Kei hadn't answered his phone, though, in days, and since he carried an Independent handheld, there was no way to trace it. It had been purely by chance that Guy had thought to search Dana Burn. He had actually been on his way to

Urus when some inexplicable feeling compelled him to turn off the road and check out the abandoned old shelter. Now he realized his hunch had been right—but why had Kei stopped at the old haunted ruins? Was this where Riki had been hiding?

And where was Kei *now*?

The alert for Riki had been almost immediately called off; apparently he had been found, though no details were offered. Guy approached Dana Burn with trepidation, worried about what he might discover within. Finding Kei's vehicle abandoned was an unpromising development, and he was trembling by the time he reached the main entrance. Surprisingly, the entryway to the old structure was unsealed.

He shut off his bike and cautiously dismounted, pulling out his knife. He peered inside the darkness, his attention riveted by a greenish light emanating from within the rebel base. He noted the radio by the door and the remnants of a fire, stepping past them both.

Someone, at any rate, had been there.

"Kei?" he called, uncertainly.

But for the echoes of his voice through the deep corridors, only silence answered him. Slowly, he crept toward the flickering green light, eventually discovering that the generator-powered lights had been activated in one of the rooms, bathing everything in it with an eerie, unworldly glow.

There was nothing in the room of interest, save a state-of-the-art generator heater and a brand new lantern, both recent models. He picked up the lantern, turning it on and then searching deeper in the old structure, making his way down dark hallways that had not been explored since the Revolution.

But despite all his efforts, he found nothing that would help him understand what had happened to Kei. He only knew now, with certainty, that something was very wrong.



"DO I LOOK LIKE A LEET?" AKI DEMANDED, tilting his head back proudly to show off his new earring. It was a single piercing, permanent, filled

with a small hoop of shiny platinum-hued Aristian gold.

Omaki smiled, finding the modification to his precious would-be pet rather fetching, despite his initial reluctance to agree to Aki's ear-piercing proposition.

"But *all* the Leets have one," the boy had wailed, staring up at his Master with such endearing fervor that the Blondie had, at length, been forced to relent.

It wasn't that Lord Ghan was against piercings; quite the contrary. However, *he* had hoped to be the one to instigate Aki's virgin piercing, and he had one or two thoughts about *where* that piercing would be.

Though it wasn't true that all young Elites had one ear pierced, many did, and Omaki wanted Aki to feel he fit in among the youngsters, many of whom might possibly target the newly-declared Elite as an outsider, an oddity in a very structured, rather unchanging society. In all his days, the Blondie had never heard of anyone not born an Elite proclaimed one later by Jupiter.

While he still harbored hopes that the boy would become his pet, already he realized that it was highly unlikely—laughable, even—that Aki would choose pethood over Elite status. So he had agreed to the piercing, much to the boy's complete delight.

Aki stood before him, standing proudly, dressed only in his pajama bottoms, before climbing up onto the Blondie's lap.

"Do you really like it?" he asked again, staring up at Omaki and thrusting his bare chest out, for some strange reason.

Lord Ghan laughed. "Where is your pajama top?"

"It's too hot."

"It's the middle of winter, Aki."

"But I get hot when I'm excited."

"Hmmm." The Blondie's mind immediately suggested several inappropriate replies to this innocent remark, all of which Omaki thankfully managed to keep to himself.

"But you like me pierced, right?"

At this, Lord Ghan's gaze lowered to the boy's exposed nipples, and he couldn't help but imagine a similar piercing there, through one of Aki's pink, pert little nipples, a wave of arousal rushing over him as he contemplated the thought. "Oh, yes," he whispered, his

voice a bit thick.

"You're getting bumpy again," Aki announced, deliberately squirming around on the Blondie's developing erection.

"I suppose that's because," Omaki whispered in his ear, quickly adjusting him on his lap to a more comfortable, *safer* position, "you bring out the *bumpy* in me."

Aki giggled at this, his laugh bringing another smile to his Master's lips.

"So did you have a good time today, my little love?"

"Oh! It was the *best* day in my entire life," the boy proclaimed solemnly.

The Blondie had taken Aki throughout the city, wherever the boy wished to go, and had bought him lots of new clothes, such as the uniform he would be required to wear at the Academy, which Aki had shown surprising interest in, as well as various toys—anything the boy pointed out and said he wanted, including a hover-board and a new Alphazanian laser. They had eaten frozen creams, slid down the Taming Tower slide together several times, and had taken a holopic together at the Arena, where they had visited all the worlds of the Quadrant in the holoprojected walk-through museum.

"I just wish this day would never end," Aki added, suddenly yawning.

"But you must sleep," Omaki replied, leaning down to kiss his nose. "You have a big day tomorrow."

"That tickles," Aki protested, wrinkling his nose and then rubbing it furiously. He yawned again, closing his eyes.

"You see? You are falling asleep right here on my lap."

"I am not," Aki protested, without opening his eyes.

Those were the last words of the happy little Leet, who promptly fell asleep in his Master's arms. Lord Ghan held him for a long time, his smile fading as he contemplated what was coming.

He did not want to let Aki go. And he found that, now that the boy's departure was imminent, his buried anger and resentment toward Jupiter was starting to break loose from the place deep inside where he had been trying to contain it.

He *hated* Jupiter, hated her with everything within him. She had

taken away his best friend, and now she was taking away his little love.

Enyu watched his Master from the shadows, frowning. He was waiting for Omaki to put Aki to bed, suspecting that the Blondie would need immediate release, as he typically did when he held the boy. But he hated the look of longing on his Master's face whenever he looked at Aki, knowing that Lord Ghan had never looked upon him in such a way.

Enyu had nothing against Aki personally. In fact, it was hard not to like him. But he was glad the boy was leaving. The Xeronian had come to feel quite jealous of his Master's obvious affection for his little "pet," and he was anxious for his competition to be gone. Then perhaps he could win Omaki's complete attention. Maybe he could even make the Blondie forget about Aki.

In his heart, Enyu knew this was very unlikely. He knew his Master loved Aki. But he also knew that he no longer served Lord Ghan simply out of loyalty or because it was what he was required to do. He loved his Master.

And he wanted him for himself.



"SO. HAVE YOU COME TO GIVE ME THE BOOT?" Voshka drawled, smiling from a chair in the great hall where he was comfortably situated. He had been waiting all day for the Blondie; Lord Mink had just returned to the penthouse, having just spent a long day at the Syndicate in preparation for the Trade Convention.

"I should," the Blondie replied wryly, "as you well know."

"Ah. Is there hope?" The Commander's eyes twinkled as he spoke. "I was certain I had done myself in."

Iason sat down opposite him, turning to Toma, who stood waiting for his orders. "Wine, Toma. Icarian Amber today, I think. And the Commander will have...?"

"The same," Voshka replied, nodding.

"How did you find your quarters? Are they acceptable, I hope?" the Blondie asked politely.

“Quite perfect, thank you.”

“Let me know if you have any issues. The room has not been used since,” now Iason faltered a little, though his expression remained an impassive mask, “well, since your brother used it.”

“I hope it wasn’t any inconvenience for you, unsealing it for me?”

“Oh, no, of course not,” the Blondie replied quickly. “It is just that it might have been better for *you*, had you chosen one of our more recently furnished rooms.”

“I don’t mind the old-fashioned furniture, it brings back memories,” Voshka remarked with a smile. “As I said, I do appreciate your willingness to accommodate me. It’s perhaps nothing but sentimental nonsense, I suppose, but I almost feel a little closer to Anori, just being in the room.”

Lord Mink had no answer to this, merely crossing his legs as he kept his gaze carefully lowered.

“It was all so tragic, the accident and all,” the Commander continued with a sigh. “Anori was so very young to have lost his life. And it was all so very odd—he was an outstanding pilot! I still find it hard to believe he crashed.”

“Yes,” Iason agreed quietly.

“I loved him, you know. It was a bit more than just brotherly love,” Voshka continued, his voice lowered.

Lord Mink looked up at this, surprised. “Oh?”

“Yes, I believe I gave you a hint about that earlier. Oh, yes, Anori and I were lovers. It was quite the scandal on Alpha Zen, I’ll tell you. We weren’t raised together, you see. The first time we met, we were both already young men. Or, he was at any rate—I was just coming into manhood.”

“I see,” the Blondie murmured, feeling decidedly uncomfortable about the direction of the conversation.

“I adored him, no question. He taught me everything I know about sexual pleasure. Anori took my virginity, you see. Ah, but...he broke my heart. I confess I loved him dearly, but Anori had, shall we say, certain *appetites*. He simply could not share his bed with only one man—or woman, for that matter. We didn’t see eye to eye on that, and it was the one thing that we fought over. Anori was simply accepting

the role of *Menteros*, do you know the term?”

“No,” Iason confessed.

“It is an ancient Alphazenian concept in which an older sibling or uncle takes it upon himself to train a younger brother or nephew in the sexual arts. There was a time when it was accepted on Alpha Zen as a perfectly respectable relationship; no one would bat an eye if you were engaged in *Menteros* with your close kinsmen. But, of course, the modern circles frown upon the custom, and the sibling version, in particular, is considered quite scandalous. Nevertheless, Anori took it upon himself to train me, much to my delight. I did not understand, however, that for him it was mostly about sex, whereas for me, it was so much more.”

The Commander became quiet, and Iason struggled to think of something to divert the conversation without appearing that he was trying to change the subject, but nothing came to mind.

“Your wine, Master,” Toma said as he approached them, very carefully handing Iason his wineglass, and then the Commander his.

“We always serve guests first, Toma,” Lord Mink reprimanded softly.

Toma bowed, blushing furiously. “Yes, of course, Master. I am sorry.” He backed away, feeling foolish and upset that he had made yet another blunder.

“You loved him, then,” Lord Mink said finally, when Voshka remained silent.

“Oh, yes. Completely. I was quite angry with him when I learned that he’d come here to Amoi, because I knew exactly what he was after. You Blondies have a reputation for being the most desirable sex partners in the Quadrant; I’m sure you know that.”

At this, Lord Mink gave a slight laugh. “I’m sure that’s an exaggeration.”

“Oh, no. Ask anyone. It’s common knowledge, I assure you. At any rate, I was quite jealous, as it seems Anori found what he was looking for; I believe he paired with Raoul Am? A friend of yours, isn’t he?”

Iason stiffened, a bit of color rising to his cheeks. “Yes, we are well acquainted,” he answered, his voice silky soft and low.

Voshka studied him for a long moment. “Forgive me for noticing,

but you appear to be uncomfortable at the mention of his name?”

“Surely you can understand that,” the Blondie answered smoothly, “as you have just informed me that you were jealous of his relationship with your brother.”

“Yes, of course,” the Commander agreed, after a moment. “Quite right—I was horrendously jealous. You see, I never loved anyone the way I loved Anori. No one ever came close, except, perhaps, Aranshu.”

“Aranshu?”

“Yes, my Aristian pet, the one who ran away from me. I believe I mentioned him to you?”

“Yes, you did,” Lord Mink nodded, and then continued, after a pause, “so then, you *loved* your pet? Aranshu?”

“Oh, yes. Much like you love Riki, I believe. In fact, I *still* love him. I would do almost anything to locate him again.”

“I see.”

The Commander shifted in his seat, giving Iason a suggestive look. “So, you’re forgiving me, then?” he asked softly.

“You don’t deserve to be forgiven,” the Blondie replied, unconsciously batting his eyes.

Somehow, despite all that had happened—or perhaps *because* of it—the two great leaders felt surprisingly comfortable together, more like old friends. The awkwardness both of them had anticipated was simply not there, and Iason found, much as he felt Voshka *deserved* it, that he could not stay angry at him, even after the part he had played in Riki’s punishment scenario. There was something about him that was impossible to resist, a sort of charisma that immediately put Iason at ease the moment he was in Voshka’s presence.

Indeed, although he *should* have been furious with the Commander, he found that he was not, and he supposed that this had something to do with why Voshka Khosi had been so successful in all his military and political endeavors. He was simply a man that others wanted around, and who would be forgiven for nearly every transgression.

When he looked up, he saw that Voshka was studying him, his intelligent eyes dark and glimmering, his lips curled into a seductive

half-smile.

“Oh, my. You really have no idea how divinely sexy you are, do you, Iason?”

“Please, Vosh.”

“Ah, you’re still calling me Vosh,” the Commander observed, clearly pleased. “I must say, you’ve fueled my fantasies for the next year to come. That afternoon was quite spectacular. I don’t suppose there’s still a possibility of that night together? Perhaps you’d like to punish *me*?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

The Commander took a sip of his wine, studying Iason. “I do apologize. I know I let things get too far out of hand. But,” now Voshka lowered his voice to the barest hint of a whisper, “I daresay you enjoyed *some* of what we did together, Iason.”

“Hush.”

“I’d like to explore you a bit more...with my tongue. You liked that, didn’t you, in the shower? A nice tongue-fucking, isn’t that what does it for you?”

“Vosh....”

The Commander leaned forward in his chair, reaching out to put a hand on his knee. “Let me make it up to you tonight,” he proposed, his eyes shining. “I haven’t had a chance to explore you completely. Let me love you tonight. You can do whatever you wish to me; I submit to you, Iason.”

“Jupiter’s sake, *stop*, Vosh.”

“You know you want to. Are you worried about Riki? Bring him, too. We’ll have him crying out to the gods within the hour.”

Lord Mink, despite himself, was becoming uncomfortably aroused by Voshka’s offer—by his touch, by the suggestive look in his eye, by, even, his mere presence. But he had no desire to share his pet with anyone, including the Commander.

“I can take punishment, if that’s your wish. Punish me. Do whatever you want to me. *Please*. Come to my bed.”

“No,” Lord Mink insisted. “Please, I must ask you to stop touching me.”

“I can’t help myself,” Voshka protested. “I’m half tempted to pick

you up and ravish you now, right there on that dinner table.”

“I told you, *no*.”

“Just one kiss then. I didn’t have the opportunity to kiss you in the bedroom.” The Commander stood up, putting his hands on the arms of Iason’s chair and leaning close. “Come, just a taste.”

“No, Vosh!” Iason snapped, turning his head to the side.

Voshka took advantage of his bared throat and began kissing him there. “You see? You’re angry. You want to punish me. I told you, you can do whatever you want.”

Ayuda and Anders stood nearby, watching them. The scene was making Ayuda nervous, and he took a step forward when Voshka stood up. Anders put a hand out to stay him, shaking his head.

“Do not interfere,” the Alphazanian ordered.

“I’ll interfere if I deem it necessary,” Ayuda shot back.

“The Blondie is capable of taking care of himself, no? He’s in no danger.”

Ayuda clenched his teeth, feeling annoyed with Anders and very uncomfortable about the whole situation. He had been beside himself when Iason had agreed to the preposterous punishment session; to the experienced bodyguard, Lord Mink’s decision seemed absurd, dangerous, and demeaning. He hated that the Commander seemed to have made Iason’s conquest his project for the duration of his visit, and found it disturbing that the Blondie was not, in his view, resisting as strenuously as he should. It made his job of protecting him all the more difficult.

Voshka let his knee rest on the chair between Iason’s legs as he boldly touched the Blondie’s now obvious erection. “You can’t deny *this*,” he whispered, continuing to kiss his neck. “Why do you resist me? Give in to your desires.”

Iason gave Voshka a playful push with his foot and the Commander fell back into his chair, laughing. He held his hands up in mock surrender. “All right, all right. Just consider my offer. So, I couldn’t help but hear quite a hullabaloo last night—I take it you punished Riki for taking things too far, then?”

“I did, indeed,” Lord Mink replied.

“What was your chosen instrument, if I may ask?”

“A paddle.”

“Ah, and I missed it. A pity. I do enjoy watching a good paddling, as you well know.” The Commander gave him a wink, grinning mischievously.

“Hmmm.” Iason crossed his legs, looking decidedly displeased.

“Speaking of which, you must be feeling that now. But I must say, you don’t appear to be in the slightest bit of pain.”

The Blondie made no answer, merely sipping his wine.

“Let me guess. A little pharmaceutical intervention? Some sort of opiate derivative, no doubt?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Iason sighed, brushing an imaginary bit of fluff from his sleeve.

Voshka laughed. “So what was Riki’s penalty? What exactly did that delightful session cost him? How many strikes?”

“I haven’t any idea. I simply held him over my knee until I was satisfied I’d made my point,” Iason answered. “He won’t be joining us for dinner tonight. Speaking of which, I hope you are hungry?”

“You know the answer to that,” came the Commander’s saucy reply.

Lord Mink simply ignored him, pretending to study his wine.

“I see. You choose to tease me. Well then, I must confess, I *do* have an appetite for more than just you. A good dinner would suit me quite well, just now.”

Iason directed his attention to Toma, who was approaching them again. “When will dinner be ready?”

“Dinner is on schedule and will be served in half an hour, Master,” Toma answered, “and I’ve just come to tell you that the new pets have arrived for the party.”

“Excellent. Bring them here.” Iason turned to Voshka, offering him a friendly smile. “Perhaps you would like to examine them, Vosh? They’re all A-class pets, fresh out of the Academy, the very best stock on Amoi. We’re having a private auction tomorrow once all the guests arrive, as I told you. You’re welcome to pick one out now, any one you like—in fact, I insist. Consider it my gift to you, to make your stay comfortable.”

“Oh, my. You’ve certainly found my weakness,” Voshka replied.

“You’ve already made my visit far more pleasurable than I dared hope it might be. I really should refuse your offer, though I confess, I’m quite tempted, quite tempted indeed.”

“As I said, I insist. You wouldn’t want to insult me by refusing my gift, would you?”

“No, I would *not*,” the Commander answered, rising to his feet when the five male pets were ushered into the great hall. He made a slow circle around them, delighted. “Good heavens. They’re spectacular!”

“I’m pleased you find them appealing. I hope one suits you, especially?” Lord Mink fervently hoped one of the pets might somehow divert the Commander’s attentions for the duration of his visit and was now extraordinarily glad he had arranged for the private auction. He watched anxiously as the man studied the pets.

Voshka shook his head, laughing. “However can I possibly choose?”

In fact, one in particular had already caught his attention, an especially pretty little pet with innocent, wide green eyes, high arching brows and shoulder-length, reddish-gold hair that seemed to stick out everywhere at once. He was the smallest of the pets, and technically the youngest, and he stared at Voshka with such awe and wonder that the Commander felt entirely enchanted by him, almost at the first glance. Despite his claim to Iason that he had a proclivity for pets of a more unruly nature, the truth of the matter was, this remark spoke *only* to his preference for Aranshu, his defiant runaway pet: when it came to any other pet or harem boy who might share his bed, he actually preferred—indeed, *expected*—docile obedience, or at least capitulation to his every desire by the end of their first night together. The Commander enjoyed being worshipped, no question, and the look of unconscious fawning on the little pet’s face was just the sort of thing he adored.

The Amoian pets wore only the merest hint of clothing: a thin sort of wrap around their groins, tied at the side. Voshka reached down and untied the boy’s wrap, opening it to examine him. The pet immediately showed signs of arousal at this action, his cock twitching and rolling as his erection quickly developed under the Commander’s

watching eye.

The boy sweetly, though perhaps a bit robotically, moved his feet about shoulders' width apart and pressed his hands behind his back, thrusting his pelvis forward as if proud to show off his sexual charms. Though like most pets he was nearly hairless in the genital region, a small hint of soft, golden-red hair at the base of his shaft was enough to secure the Commander's decision. It was widely known that this tiny tuft of hair—the "Pet's Crown"—was a sign of sexual prowess among the Amoians, and that the pet would prove especially inclined toward carnal pleasures.

Pleased, Voshka tied his wrap again, loosely, and then took the boy by his chin, turning his head from side to side to examine his profile.

The small sign that swung against his bare chest bore the identification A-999M, and the pet, who was known at the Academy for being especially shy and quiet, clutched it nervously, rather surprised—as were the other four watching pets—that the famous Commander seemed to be interested in him.

"This one," Voshka announced, still holding the pet's chin. He looked directly at him. "Your name is Azka, my pet."

"Yes, Master," the newly named pet replied, glancing at Iason uncertainly.

The Blondie nodded. "Very good. We can have a pet ring registered here in your name, if you like."

"That would be perfect. I'm terrible with those sorts of formalities."

"It is not strictly necessary, since I assume you'll be taking him back to Alpha Zen with you? The ring will have a tracer, however, which could be useful."

Voshka nodded. "Yes, yes. I'll have this one registered. Had I registered Aranshu from the start, I would have him with me now. As it is, there is simply no way to trace him. I won't make that mistake again, even though I doubt I'll have any issues with this one, will I, Azka? You're going to obey me, aren't you?"

"Of course, Master." Azka continued to stare at him, unable to believe he had just been chosen by none other than the famous Commander Khosi. He would be leaving Amoi, bound for Voshka's

palace in the legendary city of Ultanum on Alpha Zen! Further, because Voshka was not Amoian, the boy knew this meant he would most likely pair with his Master, a contingency that was always impressed upon pets at the Academy as a possibility, but one which almost never actually occurred. He found he was trembling, his chest rising quickly as his breathing came fast and shallow.

The Commander sensed his anxiety and put a calming hand on his shoulder. "Don't be afraid, little pet."

Comforted by his words, Azka instinctively reached out to clutch a bit of the Commander's cape, without even realizing he had done so. Voshka, finding this small movement endearing, smiled down at him, pleased.

"Come, Azka," he said, taking the boy's elbow and directing him toward his chair. He sat down, pointing to the floor. "Sit at my feet."

The pet obeyed, dutifully perching at his Master's feet and looking up, expectantly.

"He's absolutely delightful," Voshka remarked, reaching out to touch the boy's soft hair, testing the golden-red silky strands between his fingers. "I don't believe I've ever received a more agreeable gift. Thank you, Iason."

"I'm glad you're pleased." Lord Mink turned to the other pets, who waited docilely to be instructed. "You may all go sit by the wall until I call you." He pointed to the corner, near Riki's training post and chains.

The pets obeyed, sitting down quietly by the wall and waiting for further instructions. They watched Azka with his new Master, openly envious of his good fortune. To have been so quickly selected by the Commander was something for any pet to be proud of, and to be *named* on the spot was every pet's dream. The four remaining pets, Class numbers A-995M through A-998M, still had hopes of being chosen at the private auction, for it was rumored some of the greatest Blondies in Eos would be considering them. At least, that is what they had been told at the Academy. A private auction in Iason Mink's home was a rare occurrence, one that had been eagerly discussed for days among the young pets.

Initially, none of them were so foolish as to think the great Blondie

would give up his exotic mongrel pet for one of them. Even at the Pet Academy, everyone knew Iason Mink doted over his naughty, slum-harvested pet, the infamous Riki the Dark.

However, after Riki ran away, some expectations were admittedly changed. There was speculation that the Blondie *might* be ready to consider a new pet after this latest infraction on Riki's part. Running away was probably the worst offense a pet could commit, and most Masters would not tolerate it: the pet would be promptly discarded, after being thoroughly punished, of course. They had all witnessed the recorded session of Riki being disciplined at Lord Mink's hand—indeed, the entire Academy had gathered in a formal convocation to view the session—and the severity of that punishment offered them some hope that the day had finally come: the famous Head of the Syndicate might finally be ready to take a new pet! The thought of serving Lord Mink was both thrilling and terrifying, and each of them studied the great Blondie, marveling over him and wondering what would happen at the auction the next day.

But there was no question that the newly-named Azka, known to them as A-999M, had made off with the best catch of all: the Commander himself. As Azka began to get comfortable at his Master's feet, he could not help but glance at his peers with a bit of smugness. After all, they had been none too kind to him at the Academy, always teasing him about his wild, unkempt hair and his small, boyish frame. But none of them could now deny that Azka apparently had the goods to secure Voshka Khosi's interest, and so in the end they were silenced, forced to watch his good fortune jealously from the corner of the great hall.

"You said you preferred pets with a bit of spirit," Iason remarked. "You do realize he's an A-class pet? If you're expecting him to defy you, you're likely to be disappointed. He'll most likely do whatever you tell him to."

"Ah, well," Voshka smiled, "perhaps I exaggerated when I said I preferred defiance. There's something to be said for total submission. Besides, this one is special."

Azka, on hearing this compliment, smiled shyly at his new Master. Though he was not at all sure what they were talking about—Lord

Mink and his new Master were speaking Alphazanian, of which he knew very little—he was already starting to like the Commander and was anxious to perform for him and please him however he could.

“I hope you will be here for the party tomorrow,” Iason remarked. “I think I mentioned to you that Aki, the boy whose guardianship I am assuming, is quite a fan of yours.”

“Then, I hope I will not disappoint him,” Voshka laughed.

“That seems unlikely. The Guardianship Party starts at dusk.”

“Tomorrow I will be out most of the day and will not return until later in the evening. My agenda is quite full, I’m afraid, but I should be back before your party breaks up.”

Lord Mink nodded, relieved that the man would be out of the penthouse, at least for a time. Hopefully the new pet would provide a distraction for the sex-starved Commander—a very *welcome* distraction, at least from Iason’s view. He was admittedly starting to tire of Voshka’s eternal sex drive and incessant advances.

Fortunately, Azka seemed to have captured Voshka’s complete attention, and Iason, for the first time since the Commander had arrived, finally began to relax, allowing his thoughts to focus on the day ahead.

Soon Aki would be in his household and his charge, a responsibility the Blondie took very seriously. But perhaps even more than this, Iason had chosen his guests very carefully for the Guardianship Party. Four Blondies would join him for the occasion: Raoul, Omaki, Heiku, and Xian. If all went according to plan, he intended to bring up a matter of great importance—one that could very well prove critical not only to the future of each of them—but to all of Amoi.



TOMA QUIETLY ENTERED THE KITCHEN, GIVING Tai a start when he finally noticed him.

“You scared me!” the Aristian scolded, holding his chest.

“Sorry. I didn’t want to bother you, but Katze wanted me to ask if you needed some help. He said you might need it, what with the party

tomorrow and all.”

“No...actually, yes! I have a little emergency here,” Tai wailed, pointing to the beverage dispenser. “It’s broken! It won’t make ice! What am I going to do?”

Toma stared at the device for a moment. “Well, you could make it by hand,” he suggested. “The old-fashioned way, I mean.”

“That’s true. Of course! Why didn’t I think of that? We’ll just put several containers of water in the freezer and then chip off ice as we need it.”

Toma nodded.

“Here,” Tai dug through a cabinet and tossed some empty containers to him. “Fill these up with water. Wait! Use peach water. That will look prettier. I’ve got to check on the bird.”

“It smells amazing,” Toma replied. “What kind of bird is it?”

“An Aristian pheasant, with spiced stuffing.”

“Sounds delicious.”

The two of them worked together happily.

“The new bodyguard, Ayuda, was asking about you,” Tai remarked.

“He was?” Surprised, Toma froze, Ayuda’s breathtaking face pressing into his consciousness. “What was he asking?”

“He asked if you were attached.”

“Really?” Toma was so shocked by this that he was rendered almost speechless. Ayuda, the handsome new bodyguard, was asking about him?

Tai nodded, smiling at his reaction. “I think he might be sweet on you.”

Toma hardly knew how to react to this speculation. He shook his head, puzzling over it. “How long will it take for this water to freeze?”

“I really don’t know, probably a few hours. But if you could keep checking on it and then, once it’s frozen, start chipping off some ice into a bowl or something, that would be great.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

Toma continued to assist him throughout the night and early morning, and when he found that the containers of ice were frozen, he took one out and began chipping off bits of ice. The amber-colored ice broke off in a surprising, interesting fashion, creating beautiful,

multi-faceted ice chips.

“Pretty,” he whispered, smiling. Tai had been right: the peach water *was* more attractive.

What Toma did not realize, and what Tai had completely forgotten, was that in the freezer there was also a container of Tarnacsian cider, which Toma had erroneously mistaken for the peach water. And, since he could not read Aristian, he had ignored the label on the side of the container, assuming it had always been there.

And so, a great bowl full of Tarnacsian cider chips now sat in the freezer, about to set the penthouse on its head.

A Party to Remember

RIKI WOKE WITH A START, THE SOUND of laughter and voices in the distance confusing him. He looked at the clock and realized he had slept all day: it was already evening.

He tried to move and then groaned, remembering his punishment at Iason's hand two days before. He actually felt *worse* now than he had felt the previous day. But as much as the paddling had hurt—and still hurt—it had been completely, utterly worth it.

Punishing Iason had been glorious; indeed, he could not recall spending a more pleasant afternoon than he had that day, when the Blondie had finally been forced to submit to *his* will. The session had been nearly perfect, from beginning to end. Since almost the very day he had come into Iason's household, he had harbored thoughts of turning the table on him. Punishing him had surpassed all his fantasies, satisfying deep yearnings he had long nourished in the private terrain of his mind.

The whole experience had left him feeling almost giddy. A sense of relief, of triumph—even forgiveness, washed over him now. No matter what Iason demanded of him in the future, Riki would always be able to replay the session in his mind, to remember the few sweet hours when *he* had been Master.

Punishing the Blondie, too, had dissipated much of the mongrel's anger over his pairing with Voshka Khosi; in fact, now that he had enjoyed intimacy with the Commander himself, he could better understand Iason's attraction to him.

His only disappointment had been his inability to make the Blondie *truly* cry out. But, perhaps that was too much to ask. After all, Iason *had*, finally, asked him to stop.

That was enough.

At that moment Riki finally saw, with some surprise, the tray by his bed, with a breakfast dome and a glass of juice, and a small pill he instantly recognized.

An O-3!

Thrilled, he ingested it without a moment's delay, wondering if perhaps Katze had taken pity on him. Then he saw the small note card on the tray and picked it up, reading in disbelief.

Riki,

After you finish eating, please clean up and dress for the party if you are able. You may come whenever you feel ready. If you prefer, however, you may stay in your room.

This medication will help with the pain.

Please be on your best behavior today. Remember that you are not to discuss what happened. Let's make today a fresh start. I want to talk to you about a few things tonight, my love.

Iason

Smiling, Riki read the card several times. It was the first “note” Iason had ever written him, and for some reason, he felt pleased with it. He decided that it was because the note was addressed to him, made no direct reference to his being a pet, and because the Blondie had called him, “*my love*.” He had even asked him to “*please*” be on good behavior. As far as he could remember, this was the first time Iason had ever used the word when addressing him. Always before he had been told exactly what to do, never “*please*” or “*thank you*.” Although, granted, the next line, “*Remember that you are not to discuss what happened*” was written in full Master mode, the line immediately afterward was intriguing: “*Let’s make today a fresh start*.” He was curious about what Iason wanted to talk to him about, and he was thrilled over the O-3. It made up for his punishment the day before—even, somehow, making him feel better about the especially harsh session he had endured at Iason’s hand after running away.

He put the note card in his bedside table, in a drawer where he kept a few special things, and a handful of paper credits. There he kept also the small marble that he had harbored since he was a child—something that his mother had given him, he believed, and the only token he had to remember her by. When he had a pocket he always carried it. He also kept in this drawer the beautiful box containing the enkephalin meditation spheres the Blondie had once given him, along with the gold paper and the silver and gold bow it had come wrapped in. Besides these things there was also a mysterious, ancient-looking coin with an unusual glyph that he had found once, years before, which he kept for good luck. And, there was Kei’s pendant, which Riki still intended to return to Guy. This small pile of things comprised the totality of his treasure, and he put the note card on top, not because of the fancy gold-embossed initials I.M. at the top, but because it was from Iason, written more as a lover than as a Master.

It was especially unlike Iason to offer him pain relief after punishment, and he wondered why the Blondie had done so on this occasion. He could recall only one or two occasions—most notably, his punishment at the Emporium—when the Blondie had offered him

such relief. At any rate, he was certainly grateful for it.

He activated the breakfast dome by pushing the button at the top and then waited while his food warmed again, which took only a few seconds. Then he enjoyed a very substantial early evening breakfast in bed: krevlians, hotcakes, eggs, bacon, biscuits, and coffee, the effects of the O-3 helping to take the edge off his residual pain. He had gone to bed the night before without dinner and was famished. The food tasted so good and he felt so comfortable that he was tempted to simply go back to sleep.

But the penthouse was alive with activity, which made it impossible to seriously contemplate sleeping. He was not about to miss the chance to socialize with the other pets and attendants who had arrived for the Guardianship Party. He also didn't want to leave Iason alone with Voshka Khosi, suspecting the man would use every opportunity to lure him to his bed.

It was difficult to absolutely *hate* the Commander, especially after he had proved to be such a cooperative ally during Iason's punishment session. His feelings for him, however, vacillated wildly back and forth, and presently he was back to disliking the man, or at least *distrusting* him, wondering glumly if he had managed to seduce Iason the night before.

After eating, he got up and showered, wincing and swearing as the water stung his punished flesh. As he dressed, he spent far longer fretting over his attire than was normally the case. He told himself it was because of the party, and that he wanted to look his best. But deep in his heart, Riki knew he was dressing for Iason. He was thrilled that the Blondie had not mandated he wear some ridiculous outfit as he had when the Commander had first arrived. He wanted to wear something he knew would be appealing to Iason without being absolutely demeaning to wear, something sexy that was still his style.

He finally settled on a pair of dark blue, skintight leather pants and a sleeveless, blackish-blue halter that showed off his arms and bare midriff.

He picked up one of the chairs in the room a few times to pump up his muscles, and then did some sit-ups and pushups—just enough to tighten his muscles without making him break out in a sweat.

He studied himself in the mirror for a moment, satisfied that he had made a good choice but wishing he had something to dress himself up a bit more. Then he remembered his snakeskin belt—the one with the golden snakehead buckle and emerald green eyes—and he put that on.

Still, he felt plain. He touched his throat, wishing for a necklace of some sort.

Then, an odd thought occurred to him. For the mongrel, it was a very odd thought indeed: but Riki suddenly realized the perfect thing he could add to his ensemble that would get Iason's attention. More than that, it would be a way to thank him for his kindness in leaving him the O-3, a way of telling him that all was forgiven, that he, too, was ready for a fresh start.

He walked over to the intercom and buzzed Tai.

"Yes, Sir Riki? Was your breakfast satisfactory?"

"It was awesome. Tai, I need a favor. Could you bring me my chains—the golden ones with the initials that Iason made for me? See if you can get them to me without his seeing you, but if he asks you what you're doing, tell him I'm going to wear them for the party."

There was a long pause as Tai considered this request, feeling rather suspicious of Riki's claim that he *wanted* to wear them. "I don't know," he began, uncertainly.

"Don't worry. I'm going to wear them. Come on, trust me. Iason will love it."

"All right," Tai replied, finally, deciding that after Riki's punishment the day before, he would not be foolish enough to engage in any sort of disobedience so quickly. "I'll see if Toma can bring them to you. I'm really busy at the moment."

"Thanks, Tai."

After a few minutes, Toma arrived with the chains, looking equally dubious that Riki wanted them for any legitimate purpose.

"Sir Riki," he pleaded, "please don't make Master Iason angry today in front of all his guests."

"I'm not going to," the mongrel promised, taking the chains, and giving him a wink. "It'll be great. I promise."

Toma nodded, though he left Riki's room feeling rather worried

about what the notoriously naughty pet had in mind. But he was pleasantly surprised, as was Tai—who had been watching nervously through a crack in the kitchen door—when Riki finally came into the great hall, wearing his golden collar and his initialed shackles, a gold chain hanging between them. He walked in proudly, making straight for Iason, who was talking with Heiku and Xian.

Upon seeing his pet approaching in his chains, Lord Mink was so astonished that he simply stopped speaking mid-sentence.

“Master,” Riki said quietly, bowing his head slightly, “I’m sorry I am late.”

The Blondie stared at him for a long moment, looking so puzzled that Heiku laughed out loud, a deep, beautiful sound that turned the heads of everyone at the party.

“Don’t tell me you’ve finally tamed your pet, Iason,” Heiku teased. “Even *you* look surprised.”

“Riki, you may go and visit with the others,” Lord Mink said softly, ignoring Heiku and offering his pet a look of such affection that Riki could not help but smile in return.

Iason was, in fact, so touched by Riki’s willing submission, by his open gesture of humbling himself before him and acknowledging him as his Master that he found it impossible to attend to the conversation at hand, his eyes continually drifting to his pet. He wished the party was over and that he was alone with Riki. Suddenly he longed, more than anything, to take him to his bed and love him like he never had before.

“So what’s this get up?” Katze demanded, as Riki approached him with a lopsided grin. “And what are *you* looking so happy about? I would have thought you’d be a bit stiff today.”

“Iason gave me an O-3,” Riki explained.

“You’re shitting me.”

“Nope.”

It was the first time Katze and Riki had really spoken since the mongrel had run away—beyond the episode when Riki had been so angry about the bath hall incident—and they regarded one another for a long moment.

“I’m really sorry, Katze, about what happened, running off and

all,” Riki said finally. “Are you still pissed?”

“I was,” Katze admitted, “but I can’t deny you were punished sufficiently for it.”

“How would you know?”

“I saw it. Didn’t Iason tell you? The session is being broadcasted at all the Information centers were the initial alert was issued.”

“No, he didn’t tell me that,” Riki replied with a frown, realizing then why the Blondie had recorded their session, something that had puzzled him at the time. “So you’re saying everyone here saw that?”

“I’m afraid so. But don’t be too annoyed with Iason. That’s standard practice after a pet runs away. You’re lucky he didn’t have you whipped.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that strapping anyway.”

“You should be,” Katze answered wryly.

Riki leaned closer, lowering his voice. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something. After that strapping, I heard Iason tell you to wait for him in your room. What happened? Did he punish you even more?”

The eunuch kept his expression neutral, though he lowered his gaze.

“Katze?”

Katze looked up at him then, shaking his head. “Just let it go, Riki. All right? I don’t want to talk about it.”

Riki shrugged. “Whatever. We’re cool, then? You and me?”

“Yeah, we’re cool.”

“Hello, Riki.” Juthian joined them then, as surprised as everyone else by Riki’s choice of attire. He would never have predicted that the mongrel would walk into the hall willingly wearing his hated chains.

The mongrel nodded at him. “Hey Ju. How’s it going?”

“I’m great.”

“Hey! How’s Daryl?” Riki asked, turning back to Katze.

“Actually, he’s back now. He’s in his room.”

“Really? Can’t he join the party?”

“No. He needs to rest.”

“Oh. I see. *You’re* making him stay in bed.”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Katze replied, leaning back against the wall, his arms crossed on his chest.

"I saw your punishment for running away, Riki," Sarius remarked, smirking as he and Toma walked up to them. "I bet that *stung* a bit."

Riki frowned, giving Sarius a blank look. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Riki, you know Sarius. He's Heiku's attendant," Katze chided.

The mongrel shrugged, looking disinterested. "I don't remember him."

"Well, I certainly know *you*," Sarius answered. "And I must say, you haven't changed much. You were just as rude the last time we met."

"Seeing as you're just a lowly attendant, why would I concern myself with you? Me being a pet and all," Riki teased.

"So, Riki, you think pets have higher status than attendants? And where did you come up with *that*?" Sarius asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You call me Sir Riki, don't you?"

"I don't," Sarius replied.

"Well, Daryl does. And Toma, too. Right, Toma?"

"Well—"

"Idiot. That's only a formality, to show Master Iason respect," Katze remarked.

"How does calling *me* Sir show *him* respect?" Riki demanded.

"Might I remind you who carries the taming stick?" Katze pointed out, tapping the implement in question at his belt, for emphasis.

The mongrel rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"And I suppose I don't need to point out," Sarius continued, "that you're the only one here in chains."

Riki looked around, ignoring him. "So where's the guest of honor?"

"He's not here yet," Juthian answered.

At that moment the door chime sounded, and Toma rushed to the foyer.

"Sir Raoul," Askel announced through the intercom, as Toma opened the door.

"Bloody hell," the mongrel cursed, under his breath. "What the hell is *he* doing here?"

"Hush, Riki," Katze warned. "You're back in Iason's good graces. Don't fuck it up now."

Riki scowled, feeling especially annoyed when he caught sight of

the great Blondie. Iason had failed to tell him that he would be in attendance, and the mongrel saw his presence as a rather inauspicious sign that Raoul had been completely “forgiven” for the Taming Tower incident.

“Welcome, Lord Am,” Toma greeted, bowing, “Please come in.”

Snickering at the title “Lord Am,” Riki yelped when Katze leaned forward, painfully pinching his shoulder and neck with his vice-like grip.

“Watch yourself, Riki.”

“Ow! Fucking let go!”

“I’m just trying to save your precious ass,” the auburn-haired youth replied, releasing him. “Don’t ruin the party with one of your little tantrums.”

“Relax,” the mongrel shot back, rolling his shoulder where Katze had pinched him. “I’m not going to do anything. Fuck! Where did you learn that move?”

Katze only smiled mysteriously, sipping a glass of punch. “Hey,” he remarked, holding up the glass. “This shit is *really* good.”

Lord Am acknowledged Toma with a slight nod and then stepped inside, trailed, a little hesitantly, by Yui.

“Raoul,” Heiku called out loudly, upon seeing him. “How’s Yui doing?”

Lord Am cringed, not caring to have the question yelled across the room, but he quickly realized that Yui’s modification was no secret to anyone there. “Very well, I believe,” he answered, walking toward the Blondies, who all turned to examine the newly restored attendant.

Yui stopped in his tracks, blushing, embarrassed to be the recipient of so much attention.

“Come here, Yui,” Lord Quiahtenon commanded, motioning with his bionic arm.

Yui dutifully approached the group but then stood, head bowed.

“Are you still in pain?”

The attendant shook his head. “Not really.”

“Excellent. Let’s take a look.”

At this, Yui looked to his Master, horrified. Surely the surgeon didn’t intend to examine him *there*, in full view of the others?

Lord Am only gave him a scolding look as though disapproving of his hesitation. Yui, for the first time he could ever remember, felt angry with his Master. How could the Blondie not realize he wouldn't want to expose himself in a crowded room? Frowning, he looked away, though made no move to assist the doctor in his examination project.

"Yui," Raoul admonished, "Heiku wants to examine you. Unzip your pants."

Blushing furiously, Yui did obey the command to unzip his pants, but stopped shy of actually exposing himself.

"He can't examine you if you don't show it to him." Now Raoul sounded a bit irritated.

"That's right, Yui, nothing to be shy about. I've already seen everything when it was still lying on a tray," Heiku remarked merrily.

At this, Yui looked up at Raoul, anger flashing in his eyes.

Completely surprised by Yui's defiance, Lord Am reached down and seized the attendant's arm, whispering fiercely in his ear. "What's gotten into you? Obey me this instant, Yui! Shall I punish you here, in front of everyone?"

Yui, frightened of his Master's tone and his threat, immediately complied, pulling out his new organ, his cheeks flushing a deep crimson.

"Let's see." Heiku bent closer, examining him carefully with his good hand. As if on cue, Yui responded to his touch, his cock swelling and twitching slightly. The surgeon smiled. "Ah. Very good."

Lord Am, though pleased to see that Yui had shown his first sign of sexual function, was a bit envious that Heiku had been the one to elicit it, however clinical his touch.

Lord Quiahtenon nodded to him. "He's ready, I believe. Just be careful with him."

Xian watched this interchange with utter amazement, as did Juthian, from across the room. "Then...he's going to be normal, now? Like any other male?"

"Oh yes," Heiku replied, smiling. "Yes, I'm rather proud of my handiwork." He winked at Raoul. "Nice choice, by the way."

"You do realize," Lord Mink then stated, "how angry Jupiter will

be if she finds out what you've done?"

There was a long pause after this remark. Then Heiku turned to Iason, looking him straight in the eyes. "Yes, I realize this. And I'm willing to take that risk. Just as *you* are, Iason, by continuing to keep a mongrel pet—in *the manner that you do*—when everyone knows Jupiter disapproves."

Iason only answered this with a cryptic smile, sipping his wine.

"Touché," Raoul commented softly. Then he leaned down. "We're finished now, Yui. You can go and visit with the others."

Yui nodded, quickly covering himself and zipping up his pants. He then walked toward the assemblage of attendants that had, for some reason, gathered around Riki, his gaze lowered.

"Well, well," Riki teased. "That was quite a show."

"It was, indeed. Too bad Daryl wasn't here to see it," Katze observed quietly, although Yui did not catch the full meaning of the remark.

Riki let his gaze wander to Azka, who stood against one of the walls, looking a bit lost.

"Who's that?"

"That's the Commander's new pet," Toma replied, joining them again. "He acquired him yesterday. Perhaps we should invite him over."

"Damn. I want some more of this," Katze remarked, draining his punch and then crunching the ice cubes.

"Me too," Juthian agreed, having finished his glass as well.

"Don't drink it all," Riki protested. "I haven't had any, you know."

"Oh, my apologies, Sir Riki. I will bring you some right away," Toma said, rushing off to make good his promise.

Katze turned toward Azka and then motioned to him. "Hey! New pet. Come over here and join us."

For a moment, Azka looked surprised that he was even being addressed, raising his eyebrows with a questioning look.

"Yes, you," Katze repeated. "The Commander's pet, right?"

Nodding slightly, Azka moved forward timidly, looking both pleased and terrified to have been summoned.

"What's your name again?"

"A-99," the boy began, and then caught himself. "I mean, Azka. My name is Azka."

"I'm Katze. That's Riki, Iason's pet, and this is Juthian, Lord Sami's attendant. Sarius, here, serves Lord Quiahtenon. And this is Yui. He's Lord Am's attendant. Or...is it *pet* now?"

Yui blushed again at this, smiling at Azka. "Nice to meet you."

"Hey, speaking of Vosh, where the fuck is he?" Riki wondered aloud.

"He went to the convention center," Azka replied timidly.

"Vosh? You're calling him *Vosh* now?" Katze teased. "Exactly what happened yesterday in Iason's bedroom?"

Sarius raised a brow at this, and Katze nodded. "Uh huh. You heard right. And we're just waiting for the details. Right, Riki?"

The mongrel shrugged mysteriously, a small smile at his lips. "I'm sworn to secrecy."

"Oh right," Katze laughed. "*You*. Keeping a secret. You won't last a day."

"Care to wager on that?"

"You're on, mongrel."

"Name your price."

"You spill it before sundown tomorrow, and I'll have you over my knee," Katze answered.

"Deal. And if I don't, I'll have *you* over mine. With a paddle."

"I meant with a paddle, too."

"You didn't say paddle," Riki argued.

"It goes without saying."

Riki shrugged. "Fine. Since it will be *your* ass, smart ass."

"We'll see about that."

"Yes, we will."

The attendants all watched this exchange with interest, enjoying the wager. Toma approached them then with a tray of punch.

"I love this stuff," Katze remarked, taking an extra glass. "I'll take some to Daryl."

"Why don't you let him come to the party?" Riki demanded. "He must feel rather left out."

"I know what's best for my love," Katze replied with a wink.

“Aw. How sweet,” the mongrel teased. “For your *love*.”

The others smiled as Katze blew a kiss over his shoulder, giving his ass a little shake as he walked off.

“He sure is in a good mood now that Daryl’s back,” Toma remarked.

“Hey, this shit is good,” Riki announced, draining his punch. “And these weird little ice cubes are cool.”

Toma smiled. “I’ll be sure to tell Tai.”

“I like crunching ice,” Riki replied, laughing suddenly for no apparent reason. “Shit! What’s in this stuff?”

Toma shrugged. “I’m not sure. I’ll ask.”

“Bring me some more, please.”

“Me too,” Yui stated, slamming his empty glass on the tray.

“And me,” Juthian agreed.

Sarius finished off his punch quickly and added it to the tray. “Find out what the recipe is! I want to learn how to make this.”

“I’ll ask,” Toma replied.

Azka sipped his punch a bit more cautiously, though he smiled at the others, happy to be included in the fun.

“So, what’s your name again? Aztar?” Riki began, giving the pet a little poke. “What’s it like to be the pet of the famous Commander? I suppose he ravished you last night. Fucked your little pet ass raw.”

Blushing at this, Azka bit his lip, uncertain as to how to reply. He knew that he was not at liberty to discuss what went on in his Master’s private chambers. The truth of the matter was that the Commander had *not* ravished him, though he had insisted he perform for him multiple times—much to Azka’s delight, for he was happy to please his new Master.

“Don’t mind Riki,” Yui advised, leaning toward him. “Surely you’ve heard all about him at the Academy.”

Smiling, the pet gave a tentative nod.

“What the fuck does that mean? What exactly have you heard?” Riki demanded.

“Oh come now, Riki. Everyone knows all about *you*,” Juthian teased.

Putting a hand on his hip with mock offense, the mongrel stuck his

nose into the air. "I'm sure I don't know *what* you mean."

"Sir Omaki has arrived," Askel announced over the intercom.

"Excuse me," Toma whispered, handing Sarius the tray and rushing to the door to admit the Blondie and his household.

"Hey! Why did you give this to me?" Sarius demanded, staring at the tray of empty glasses in confusion.

Yui and Juthian giggled at this, and Riki patted the attendant's shoulder reassuringly. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but it looks like *you're* the one with the lowest status."

"Lord Ghan, you are most welcome," Toma greeted, with another low bow.

"Omi!" Heiku called out. "Get your Blondie ass over here!"

"Nice of you to finally show up!" Lord Sami teased.

"Don't make me use my whip," Omaki shot back, nodding toward Raoul and winking at Iason.

At that moment, Yousi stepped into the room, much to Iason's surprise, for he hadn't invited the Blondie.

"Yousi!" Heiku exclaimed, equally surprised. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Yes, that is...I didn't know I was coming, either," Yousi replied.

"He stopped by just as we were leaving," Omaki explained, "and so I insisted he come along."

"Yes, of course, you are most welcome, Yousi," Lord Mink said graciously, although he privately found the situation slightly awkward. Yousi had not been invited for the simple reason that Iason had intended to speak to the others about a matter that would perhaps be confusing—or even disturbing—to their old friend.

"Thank you, Lord Iason," Yousi answered, bowing. "I am sorry to intrude upon your private affair."

"Nonsense. Come in, come in. And where is the guest of honor?" Iason asked, spying Aki peeking out from behind the safety of his Master's legs. "Don't tell me you forgot to bring the most important person of all? Commander Khosi shall be so disappointed not to meet the great Commander Aki."

At this, Aki leapt out from behind Omaki, grinning. "He didn't forget me!" he announced happily.

“Splendid. Now I should tell you, Aki, that the Commander has stepped out for a few moments, but shall return in time for dinner, and he is *most anxious* to meet you. So now, come over here and give me a kiss,” Iason instructed, with a gentle smile.

Looking around the penthouse with wide eyes, the boy proceeded toward his new Guardian boldly, though his heart was beating fast. As he approached, Iason bent down to claim his kiss, and the boy humored him by offering a sweet peck to his cheek.

“And now I shall kiss you,” Iason announced, giving the boy a kiss on the forehead, before straightening. “Welcome to my home, Aki. I very much hope that you will be happy here.”

“Yes, Sir,” Aki murmured, looking back toward Omaki, who watched this exchange with a mixture of bittersweet emotions.

“Now, this is *your* party, so why don’t you go over to the punch table and get something to drink and a cookie, and then later we’ll have a nice dinner and you can open your presents.”

“Yes...um...what should I call you?” Aki whispered.

“You may call me Guardian,” Iason replied.

“Yes, Guardian.”

The door chimed again, and this time Askel announced, “There is a...little boy who has arrived. He won’t tell me his name.”

“Ah. I had almost forgotten. Aki, I invited a boy about your age to the party. His name is Suuki, and he lives the next floor down. He will be in the same class as you at the Academy.”

Excited, Aki turned and ran to the door to welcome the new guest. For a moment both boys simply stared at each other.

“Are you here for the party?”

“I think so,” Suuki replied shyly. He held a present out. “This is for you.”

“What is it?” Aki asked, excited.

“It’s a—”

“Now, you’re not supposed to *tell* him what it is,” Toma interrupted, smiling at Suuki. “Here, I’ll take that. Aki will open his presents later, after dinner. Now, Aki, why don’t you and Suuki go get yourself some punch and cookies?”

“Come on!” Aki yelled, grabbing Suuki by the hand. “And then, do

you want to see my fish?"

"You have fish?" Suuki asked, looking decidedly envious.

"You can help me feed them. We have to feed them or they'll die!"

"I had a dead bird once," Suuki remarked.

"Was it dead the whole time?"

"No, just at the very end."

"How old are you?" Aki demanded.

"Nine."

"Me too! Look!" Aki showed off his earring proudly. "I just got pierced."

"Lucky," Suuki breathed.

Almost immediately the boys bonded as though they had been friends forever, and Omaki watched them together, pleased that Iason had thought to invite someone Aki's own age to the party. In fact, Suuki was the first boy his own age Aki had been around since Lord Ghan had brought him to Midas. It would be good for him to have a friend.

"Well, if it isn't catboy," Riki remarked, as his old rival made his way toward the group, along with Ru and Kahlan.

"Riki," Enyu acknowledged, arching his brow with an air of feigned disdain.

"Hmmm. Look who's all high and mighty now."

Enyu looked away, pointedly ignoring him.

"What's wrong, cat got your tongue?" the mongrel teased.

"That joke wasn't funny the first fifty times you told it," Enyu replied.

"Ru!" Sarius smiled, pleased to see his old friend. And it seemed, to him, that Ru looked exceptionally well. "I'd give you a hug but..." Sarius shrugged, holding up the tray of glasses.

"Hello, Sarius. Are you serving tonight?"

"No!" Sarius protested, as the others laughed. "Toma just ran off and left this with me."

"Oh, Sarius," Toma exclaimed, rushing over to reclaim the tray. "I don't what I was thinking. My mind...is in knots."

"No big deal," Sarius replied reassuringly, his eyes now locked on Ru and the boy's delightfully skintight outfit. He was about to

comment on it when Ru put his hand behind a young, rather attractive dark-haired youth, pushing him forward.

"Everyone, this is Kahlan."

Kahlan was greeted warmly by everyone except Sarius, who eyed him jealously, noticing right away the way Ru's hand lingered on the young man's back, and sensing, with an anxious heart, that there was something going on between them.

Kahlan gave a slight nod, feeling a bit awkward, especially when he saw the unfriendly look gifted him by Sarius. His gaze drifted over to the group of Blondies, his eye caught again by the beautiful Blondie who had bent down to kiss Aki a few moments before.

"Is that one Iason Mink?" he whispered to Ru.

"Yes, you mean the one with the ivory cape? Yes, that's Sir Iason."

Kahlan stared at him for a moment, an uncanny sensation creeping over him. Strangely, the Blondie reminded him of someone—someone he had just recently been thinking of, in fact, though he decided it wise to keep this observation to himself.

"What is it, Kahlan?" Ru whispered. "You look upset about something."

Kahlan shook his head. "It's nothing." As if to prove his point, he moved behind Ru, putting his arms around him. The others noted this intimacy with a few raised eyebrows.

Sarius, feeling decidedly jealous now that all his suspicions were confirmed, was struggling to rein in his emotions. Ru had been his closest friend for years, and more recently, Sarius had started to develop more intense feelings for the beautiful grayish-blue-haired attendant, feelings that he had believed were being returned. In fact, it had always been something of a game the way they flirted with each other. And now this *Kahlan*, whoever he was, had come and spoiled everything.

"So...who are you, exactly?" Sarius finally asked, unable to hold back his curiosity, however bitter. "I don't recall Ru ever mentioning you."

Ru laughed. "I'm sorry. Kahlan is...well, he's staying with us now. He's from Aristia."

"Oh really? Tai will be interested to meet you," Toma remarked.

“In fact, I’d better go see if he needs any help.”

“I’ll go.” Ru offered. “Come on, Kahlan, you can meet him. Tai is Aristian, like you.”

“He is?”

“Yes,” Ru answered, leaning closer to whisper in his ear, “now don’t go falling in love.”

“Too late,” Kahlan whispered back, with a wink. “I’m already falling in love with someone. I’m pretty sure, anyway.”

Ru beamed at this, reaching back to take his hand as they walked together into the kitchen, while Sarius stared after them, his eyes cold and dark. He had managed to overhear their whispered flirtation and was beside himself with jealousy.

“Someone’s not too happy,” Yui whispered to Juthian, who nodded. It was plain to everyone, except perhaps Ru—and Riki, because he didn’t care about such drama—that Sarius was very upset over Ru’s new acquaintance.

In the kitchen, Tai was frantically rushing about in a state of panic.

“Ru! Thank Armah! Please tell me you’ve come to help me!”

Ru laughed. “Of course, Tai. Relax. Oh, but I want you to meet someone. This is Kahlan.”

“Thank Armah. I can finally speak to someone in my own tongue,” Kahlan said in Aristian.

Tai, who had not been in the mood to meet anyone, even Ru’s special someone, stopped dead in his tracks upon hearing his own language. He turned to look at Kahlan, his eyes wide.

“You’re from Aristia!”

“As are you, I take it.”

“Yes.”

Kahlan smiled, feeling puzzled over Tai’s obvious nervousness. Or was he just worked up over his kitchen duties?

“I haven’t been there for over two years, though,” he added.

Tai visibly relaxed at this, nodding. “I see. What is your House?”

“The House of Tuhn. What’s left of it, anyway. And you?”

“Merovia.”

Kahlan opened his mouth, stunned. “Merovia, as in...the *Royal Merovians*?”

Tai blushed, nodding. "Yes."

"My. Should I be bowing, then?"

"No," Tai answered quickly, almost angrily.

"What are you two talking about?" Ru demanded, pouting. "I'm feeling quite left out."

"Just pleasantries," Kahlan replied, with a dismissive laugh.

"Yes, we aren't talking about anything," Tai added, a little more loudly than was necessary.

"Okay," Ru replied, puzzled. He glanced at Kahlan, perplexed.

Kahlan shrugged.

"I'm sorry," Tai apologized. "I'm...I'm not myself. I'm worried about the party, and dinner."

"Tell you what. Why don't I leave you two to do your kitchen magic and I'll go try to make some friends," Kahlan suggested, having the distinct impression that Tai felt anxious around him. "I'd help, but I think I'd just get in the way."

"The cake!" Tai suddenly yelled, when the tiny chime went off.

Ru turned to Kahlan. "Good idea. Oh! You might tell Sarius to come in here, if he wants to help out."

Kahlan nodded, slipping out of the kitchen. He felt puzzled. It wasn't that Tai was unfriendly, exactly, but there had definitely been something amiss with the Aristian. He had the distinct impression that Tai was hiding something. And he was royalty...yet working as a chef in a kitchen. Very odd.

"Oh, Tai!" Ru exclaimed, as the fretting chef removed the three large, triangular cakes from the oven. "That smells heavenly."

Tai smiled, relaxing a little. "It's an Aristian Triple Chocolate Cake."

"*Triple* Chocolate! I didn't know there was such a thing. Aki will love it!"

"I hope so. I hope I remembered everything."

"Well, they look—and smell—wonderful. So," now Ru lowered his voice a little. "What do you think of Kahlan?"

"Kahlan? Oh! He's...he seems very nice. So are you *together*, Ru?"

"Yes," Ru replied, with a wide smile.

"Good. I'm happy for you."

“And what about Odi? You mentioned on the line yesterday—”

“Well, we were going to...be together last night, like I said, but he got called away. There was some security issue and I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Security issue?”

Tai nodded. “Apparently there was a break-in of some kind, in the suite belonging to, um, Lord Chi, I think it was.”

“Sir Megala? That’s a bit odd. He’s the one who designed this Tower, actually.”

The Aristian shrugged. “I don’t know much about it, but Odi seemed concerned, you know, with the Commander being here and all.”

“Were they just thieves?”

“Actually, I really don’t know anything about it. As I said, Odi just took off when it happened and he hasn’t been back. I doubt he even slept last night.”

“What can I do in here, Tai?” Ru asked, looking around the kitchen.

“Well...you can check the ice chips. The machine broke, and we’ve been chipping them by hand.”

“Oh! Everyone loves the punch, by the way. They want to know what’s in it. Sarius wants the recipe.”

Tai shrugged, looking puzzled. “It’s nothing special.”

“And they *really* like these ice chips,” Ru added, opening the freezer. “There’s still plenty.”

“Good. Actually, they’re made of peach juice. I thought they’d look pretty.”

Back in the great hall, Omaki and Yousi had joined the other Blondies just as Toma brought them another round of punch.

“Iason! Put that wine down,” Heiku demanded. “You have to try this punch, and we all have to make a toast!”

Lord Mink smiled, obliging him. Although he didn’t care much for punch, the guests all seemed to be raving over it, and now he was curious.

“To Iason, for having such a marvelous party and a nice ass, and to Omaki, for arriving late so that we could all get drunk on the punch

before he could drink it all,” Heiku announced solemnly, raising his glass.

“What about *my* ass?” Lord Ghan protested, one hand on his hip.

“Your ass is very nice, too,” Heiku conceded. Then he turned to Yousi, giving him a little spank. “Although Yousi has the best ass here.”

At this, Lord Xuuju blushed, looking both surprised and puzzled.

“I’ve been told my ass is nothing to laugh at,” Xian interjected, feigning offense.

“What do you think, Raoul?” Heiku asked. “Which of us has the best ass?”

“We all know his answer to *that*,” Omaki remarked.

They all laughed, although Iason looked uncomfortable with the joke.

“I daresay you’re blushing, Iason,” Lord Ghan teased. “Your cheeks are pink.”

“Are they? Is that why you prefer Iason’s ass, Raoul, for his pink cheeks?”

“At least *his* isn’t hairy,” Raoul quipped, sending the others into stitches.

“Do you hear this, Yousi?” Heiku demanded, looking grave. “My ass has just been insulted. And I’m sure you can attest, you’ll not find a hair on this fine piece of work.”

With that, Heiku turned around and unfastened his pants, lowering them to bare his beautiful, golden buttocks for all to see.

Unable to resist, Omaki reached out and gave the Blondie a hard spank.

“Ow!” Heiku protested, laughing, as he fastened his pants again and turned around. “You’d better watch out, Omi. I’ll spank you with *this*.” He wiggled his bionic hand threateningly.

“Don’t tease me, Ku-Ku,” Lord Ghan replied seductively. “But if you’re serious, I can fit you in sometime next week.”

“Fit him in *where*?” Raoul teased.

“I daresay *you* know where,” Omaki replied, batting his eyes. “You’re the one among us who’s put his cock more places than most.”

“Not *more* places,” Heiku corrected. “Just the same place, multiple

times.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Lord Am shot back, winking at Iason.

Lord Mink smiled stiffly at this merriment, feeling rather puzzled over the high spirits of the guests. He looked at the punch, wondering if there was something particular in it. He took a sip and, while agreeing with the general assessment that it was especially good punch, found that there was something rather...*familiar* about it, though he couldn’t quite place what it was.

“What do you say, Yousi?” Heiku asked, putting his arm around the perplexed-looking Blondie. “Shall we take Omi up on his offer? Have a nice little threesome at the Taming Tower, or at least give him a good spanking?”

“I have some new paddles in,” Yousi replied innocently.

The others laughed, and Lord Quiahtenon leaned over and kissed the top of Yousi’s head. “You’re always a delight, Yousi.”

“Now, let’s see,” Omaki calculated, holding up his hand, “You’ve had Yousi, I’ve had Megala and Sanyara, Raoul’s had—”

“That’s enough,” Iason interrupted. “Perhaps we ought to adjourn up to the Observatory for the auction.”

“Ah, yes. Nothing quite like A-class pets, fresh out of the Academy. And if they are anything like *that* one,” Omaki gestured to Azka, “I’m going to be rather jealous not to be taking one home. Speaking of pets, where’s Ima?”

Heiku frowned at this, shaking his head. “At home. She was very disobedient.”

Lord Ghan looked interested. “Oh really? What did she do?”

“She paired with another pet without my permission. And now she’s got a useless bug.”

The other Blondies looked completely shocked at this.

“You’re getting rid of her, then?” Xian asked.

“Of course he’s getting rid of her,” Raoul answered, as though there wasn’t even a question as to what should be done. “She ought to be thoroughly punished first.”

“She *will* be,” Heiku replied, looking extraordinarily angry. He was, in fact, quite upset with the pretty female pet, who had only been

in his household for a very short time.

"You're welcome to bid today, Heiku," Iason remarked, "although you'll have to compete with Raoul and Xian."

Both Blondies looked surprised at this.

"What? I wasn't planning on taking one," Lord Am stated.

"Nor was I," Xian agreed.

"I expect each of you to take a new pet, and so does Jupiter," Iason replied quietly.

There was a brief silence as the full meaning of this sunk in.

Heiku looked at Raoul. "He's right, of course: for appearances."

"Yes," Omaki added, lowering his voice. "I must confess, there's already a good deal of gossip about you, Raoul. And you, too, Xian."

"Come," Lord Mink said invitingly, turning to lead them upstairs, "they're quite splendid, I assure you."

"I hope they're male," Heiku remarked bitterly.

"Where are they going?" Yui asked, as the Blondies began heading down the hall toward the Observatory stairway.

"I think they're having the auction now," Toma replied.

A look of confusion flickered across Yui's features. "Auction?"

"Pet auction. Master Iason brought some A-class pets especially for the party."

"Pets?"

Juthian and Yui exchanged horrified looks.

Upstairs, the Blondies filed into the Observatory, all of them falling silent upon seeing the four pets waiting for them there.

"My, my," Omaki whispered.

"They *are* very nice," Heiku conceded.

Even Raoul and Xian had to agree, both of them finding the pets especially attractive. In fact, Lord Sami, who had finished off three glasses of punch before Raoul even arrived at the party, was developing an erection just looking at them. Embarrassed, he sat down on the divan, adjusting his cape to hide his arousal. His efforts were quite unnecessary, given the fact that the other Blondies were struggling with similar urges, each worried that the others would notice.

"I'd like to see them completely undressed," Omaki announced,

voicing what all of them were privately hoping.

"Pets," Iason commanded. "Remove your wraps."

The boys all did so, untying their groin wraps and letting the flimsy fabric fall to the floor.

Heiku could not take his eyes off the pet nearest him, a sultry-looking boy with blonde hair and dark brown eyes.

"100,000 credits for this one," he stated, after a moment.

"Are there any other bids?" Iason asked. "Raoul?"

Lord Am shook his head. "I'll take the dark-haired one."

"Would you like to place a bid first?" Lord Mink prompted, smiling.

Raoul blushed. "Of course. I'll put 100,000 on him."

Lord Sami, who had been rather taken by the dark-haired pet as well but didn't want to challenge Raoul for him, turned his attention to the other two pets.

"Xian? Do you see something you like?"

The Blondie shrugged, feigning indifference. "Either of the other two."

"Surely you have a preference," Iason pressed.

Xian now felt uncomfortably warm, and looking at the naked pets wasn't helping. "The one...with the nipple ring," he whispered, swallowing.

"And your bid?"

"100,000, as well."

"Very well. I'll accept all your bids." Iason turned to Yousi. "Yousi, are you bidding?"

Yousi shook his head, not wanting to give up Arian, even for one of these remarkable pets. There was too much in his life that was changing, and he didn't want his pet to change, too.

"Then, this auction is over. Pets, you may get dressed."

The one remaining pet, A-997M, tried not to feel slighted that he had been passed over, though he found tears forming in his eyes. As he knelt down to gather his wrap, he caught the attention of Lord Ghan, who approached him.

"You're a very pretty pet," he said reassuringly. "If I didn't already have one, I'd take you home."

The boy nodded, appreciative of the Blondie's kind words.

"Now, I have something I want to talk about, and I don't want anyone distracted," Iason announced. "So I'll ask the pets to please go downstairs and join the party."

"No pairing?" Omaki teased, a little disappointed as the pets dutifully left.

The others laughed, although they were all equally, rather uncomfortably aroused, and the sight of the pretty pets engaged in coital pleasures would have been too much.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm about ready stain my trousers as it is," Heiku commented wryly.

"You're not the only one," Lord Ghan admitted. "I've been sprung for the last half hour."

"That was because Heiku showed you his ass," Raoul teased.

"I have an erection, too," Yousi announced.

"They *were* very pretty," Xian remarked.

"Are you talking about his cheeks or the pets?" Omaki quipped.

Now Lord Mink turned to Yousi, wondering if he should ask him to leave. He wasn't sure how the Blondie would react to what he had to say. "Yousi," he whispered, leaning down, "I forgot to ask Toma to bring us some more punch. Do you think you could do me a favor, and go down and ask him for me?"

"Of course," Yousi answered, happy to be of assistance.

The others exchanged puzzled looks, knowing full well that Iason only had to summon Toma via intercom.

"Why did you send him away?" Heiku asked, as soon as Yousi left the Observatory.

"Because I want to talk to you about something of great importance, and I wasn't sure how he would react." Iason paused, looking at each of them, one by one.

"What is it, Iason?" Raoul asked, concerned.

"Raoul, do you remember why Yousi was modified?"

Surprised at the question, the Blondie paused before replying. "Of course."

"It was because he claimed Jupiter could be brought down. Isn't that right?"

Lord Am looked decidedly uncomfortable. “We’re not to talk about that, as you well know.”

“We *are* going to talk about it. Because what Yousi said was correct: there *is* a way.” With that, Lord Mink reached into his cape pocket and pulled out Yousi’s logbook, which he tossed at Raoul’s feet. “And it’s all right there.”

“What is that?” Heiku asked.

“It’s Yousi’s logbook,” Lord Ghan murmured.

Lord Am remained frozen for a moment, and then reached down and picked up the book, thumbing through it. “Where did you get this?”

“From Omaki.”

Raoul frowned, turning to the Blondie. “You’ve had this, all this time?”

“No. It just came to me recently via messenger capsule, from Yousi.”

“From Yousi?” Heiku and Raoul exchanged confused looks.

“Yes. From Yousi—the old Yousi. *Our* Yousi. It seems he was afraid Jupiter would discover what he was up to, and so he took certain precautions. I received these logs recently via a messenger capsule that Yousi had sent to me nearly five years ago.”

“Why are you bringing this up, Iason?” Raoul demanded.

“Yes,” Lord Sami agreed, looking rather grave. “I think we ought to get rid of the logs.”

“That’s what I brought you all together to decide. If we’re going to destroy the logs, I want us all to be in agreement.”

“Why us, Iason?” Heiku asked.

“Because each of us has a reason to want a life without Jupiter’s intrusion.”

A long silence followed this remark.

“Are you saying,” Lord Quiahtenon whispered, “that *you* want to bring down Jupiter?”

“I’m putting it on the table for discussion,” came Lord Mink’s cryptic reply.

Raoul stood up. “Are you out of your mind? Have you any idea what would happen to us if Jupiter knew we were even discussing

this?”

“There are many things that Jupiter would be upset to learn about us,” Lord Mink replied calmly, looking directly at him. “About *each* of us.”

“This is insane!”

“He *does* have a point,” Heiku remarked quietly. “If Jupiter ever learns about Yui, Raoul, you’re in for it, as am I.” He turned to Xian. “And what you’re doing with Juthian is just as serious.”

Lord Sami blushed furiously. “How do you know about that?”

“Oh, come now. Everyone knows. Megala’s already told all of Eos that you took Juthian to your lake villa.”

“That nosy little gossip!” the Blondie shouted, jumping to his feet.

Lord Am shook his head. “This is still insane. Omaki, don’t tell me you’re on board with this?”

“I have no great love for Jupiter at the moment,” came the Blondie’s rather clipped reply.

Raoul turned to Lord Mink. “Iason. You seriously don’t mean to go against Jupiter? Listen: it can’t be done. She’ll find out. Jupiter has eyes and ears...*everywhere*. Surely *you* must know that!”

“Read the logs, Raoul.”

“I don’t need to read them!” Lord Am shot back angrily, throwing the logs to the ground. “Jupiter means *order*. Without Jupiter, we’d have nothing but total anarchy. You mean to let all of Tanagura go to ruin over your perverted lust for that mongrel!”

“I’m hardly advocating the destruction of Tanagura, Raoul,” Iason retorted hotly. “Don’t you think I care about my own city?”

“It’s not *your* city, Iason!”

“You know what I mean! I *am* Head of the Syndicate, after all!”

“We all know who you are!”

“Please, let’s quiet things down a bit,” Omaki cautioned.

“I can’t believe you’d turn against Jupiter! After everything she’s done for you. You’re ungrateful, that’s what I think!” Lord Am continued.

“I was counting on your loyalty, Raoul. You *promised*.”

“You know I would do almost anything for you, Iason. But this is *suicide*.”

"Why don't we read the logs before we make any sort of decision?" Lord Ghan suggested.

"I don't need to read them," Raoul repeated. "I'm against this absurd plan."

"I think we should get rid of the logs," Lord Sami agreed. "Throw them in that fire, over there."

"I don't know," Heiku said thoughtfully, picking up the logbook and thumbing through it. "Have you read any of this, Omaki?"

"Not really. It's all over my head," Lord Ghan confessed. "If only Yousi had remembered to interpret his findings for the rest of us."

"Interpret what?" Yousi asked, standing at the entrance to the room. He had been there for some moments, listening to the argument in confusion.

The Blondies all turned, now falling silent.

Heiku sighed. "Interpret this, Yousi," he said, holding up the logbook. "It's something you wrote...years ago."

Upon seeing the tiny logbook, Yousi stiffened, more memories suddenly flooding back. In an instant, he remembered what had happened to him. He remembered writing the logs, and Jupiter discovering them. And then....

"Yousi!" Lord Quiahtenon leapt up and rushed over to him when he saw the blood drain from the Blondie's face. "Are you all right?"

Yousi's gaze gravitated to the logbook still in Heiku's hand. He reached down, taking the book from him.

"My logs," he whispered weakly.

"You remember?" Astonished, Heiku watched as Yousi opened the book and flipped through it, nodding.

"I don't remember...*exactly* what I wrote. But I know," Yousi fell silent for a moment before looking up at Heiku. "I know what this book contains. And that this is why I am...the way I am now." He looked at Omaki. "I sent this to you."

"Yes," Lord Ghan agreed.

"And now you're all talking about what to do about it. Well, I'll tell you what to do: take a good look at me. You want to be like me?" Yousi held up the book. "I say burn it."

"I agree," Xian said passionately. "Let's get rid of it, right here."

Right *now*.”

“I second that,” Raoul announced.

“This is too important a decision to make so quickly,” Omaki countered. “Why don’t we all sit down and discuss this calmly.”

A sudden high-pitched scream, one that Lord Ghan recognized well, startled them all. “Aki,” he muttered under his breath, glancing at Iason. “I’m sorry. I’ll go take care of it.”

Lord Mink nodded almost dismissively, his eyes locked on Raoul. “You’re not even giving this serious consideration.”

“That’s because I *care* about you, Iason. I know what Jupiter can do. Yousi’s right. *It’s too dangerous*. We’re jeopardizing everything just discussing this. What if Jupiter is listening right now?”

Iason softened a bit at this, shaking his head. “I don’t think Jupiter even knows about the Observatory. It wasn’t in the Tower designs.”

Toma was standing at the doorway uncertainly, holding a tray of punch. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Master,” he said softly. “But you wanted more punch?”

Iason turned to him, looking horrified as he realized what Toma had most likely overheard.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Toma said, rather foolishly.

The Blondies all looked at each other.

“Now what do we do?” Heiku whispered.

“I won’t...say anything. I promise,” Toma pleaded, looking terrified.

“Of course you didn’t hear anything,” Iason replied, regaining his composure. “There was nothing for you to hear. Now, leave the punch, and go.”

“Yes, Master,” Toma whispered, his face flushing red. He glanced at Xian before leaving.

“That’s a problem, right there,” Raoul remarked.

Lord Sami nodded. “Toma isn’t good about keeping secrets.”

“I’ll talk to him later tonight,” Iason said.

“What if he says something to the others, now?” Heiku demanded.

Lord Mink shook his head. “I don’t think he will. He looked petrified.”

Omaki, meanwhile, hurried downstairs, feeling increasingly angry

when he heard Aki continue to scream. He walked into the great hall and saw the boy dashing around the room, screaming and giggling as Suuki chased him and the others in the room tried unsuccessfully to quiet them.

“Aki!” Lord Ghan bellowed.

The boy came to a complete stop, looking up in surprise as Omaki walked toward him and then knelt down and shook him. “What do you think you’re doing, screaming like that? This may be your party, but I expect you to behave appropriately, or I’ll turn you over my knee in front of everyone here, you can count on it. Is that understood?”

Aki stared back, breathing hard, his eyes strangely dilated.

Omaki frowned, touching the back of his hand to his forehead. The boy felt warm, though that was probably from running.

“I’m sorry,” Aki whispered. “I can’t...help it. I’m too excited.”

“You’d better help it, if you know what’s good for you. You don’t want to ruin the day by getting spanked, do you?”

Aki shook his head solemnly.

Omaki turned to Suuki, who was watching Aki’s reprimand with wide eyes, looking terrified.

“You, too, Suuki. I expect you to behave, or I’ll spank you both. Is that understood?”

The boys both nodded.

“Now,” Omaki said, leaning forward to kiss Aki’s forehead, “you know I don’t want to do that. You behave, and I won’t have to. Why don’t you go get some more punch, and then try to settle down.”

“They seem to have a lot of nervous energy,” Juthian remarked, stepping forward. “Maybe if I took them to the pool?”

Upon hearing this, Aki and Suuki looked at each other with utter delight. “Can we, Master?” Aki pleaded.

“That’s a good idea, Juthian,” Lord Ghan nodded, deciding not to correct Aki, though he had called him *Master*. “Yes, you may go. Now, mark my words, I don’t want to hear another scream out of either of you. If I do, you know what will happen.”

“We won’t,” Aki promised. “But I don’t have swimming trunks.”

“Ah well, just swim naked then, I suppose.”

The boys giggled at this.

“Good! I’m hot!” Aki announced. “I want to be naked and wet!”

“You’re hot from running around,” Omaki remarked, patting him on the bottom. “So settle down.”

“Here,” Juthian said, bringing them both some more punch. “This will help cool you down.”

The boys drank greedily and Lord Ghan, satisfied that matters were under control, hurried back up to the Observatory.

Meanwhile the new pets, spying Azka, gravitated toward him. He smiled, glad to see familiar faces, even if these were the same pets that had very recently looked down their noses at him.

“So, do you have new Masters?” he asked.

“All of us, except him,” replied Raoul’s new pet. He motioned to A-997M, who bowed his head, looking a little depressed.

“Who are your Masters?” Yui demanded, overhearing this.

“I’m the pet of Lord Am,” the dark-haired pet answered, proudly.

“That’s *my* Master!” Yui exclaimed.

“Then, I suppose you’ll be taking care of me.”

“Hmmm.” Yui looked decidedly displeased, turning away rudely.

“What about you two?” Sarius asked, finding it curious that *three* pets had been purchased.

“Lord Quiahtenon chose me, and he belongs to Lord Sami,” the blonde-haired pet replied.

“Uh oh. Juthian won’t like that,” Riki remarked.

“Won’t like what?” Katze asked.

“Xian took a pet.”

“No shit?”

Riki shrugged. “Apparently.”

“Well, that’s smart. People were starting to talk.”

“But if Heiku took a pet,” Sarius began, frowning, “I guess that means Ima’s getting the boot.”

“So soon? I thought he just bought her,” Katze remarked. “Where is she, by the way?”

“He made her stay behind. I don’t know the details, but I know she’s in trouble over something. Master Heiku was upset with her, anyway. I heard him yelling.”

“Poor Ima,” Yui said. “She won’t be too happy tonight.”

"No," Sarius agreed. "She won't."

"I need a smoke," Riki announced. "Katze?"

Katze nodded. "I could use one as well."

"Mind if I join you?" Kahlan asked.

"Doesn't bother me," Riki shrugged. The three of them walked off toward the balcony.

Unnoticed, Enyu slipped away from the others, heading down the guest wing. The Xeronian had begun to feel certain surprisingly insistent urges, urges that confused him, given the time of the month. It wasn't anywhere near the new moon, and yet he was feeling wildly aroused. Although initially he had planned to simply look for a quiet, empty room in which to relieve himself, the next thing he knew, he was following Juthian and the boys down to the pool area instead.

Omaki rejoined the others in the Observatory, glad to see that everyone had calmed down a bit. He sat across from Lord Mink, trying to focus on what the Blondie was saying, but finding instead his thoughts...and his gaze...drifting to Iason's nether regions.

Was he just imagining it, or was there an unusually large bulge there? And now that he thought about it, he was feeling strangely aroused himself. Perhaps it was threatening to spank Aki that had done it, or the boy's proclamation that he was "*hot*" and wanted to be "*naked and wet*." Whatever the reason, Omaki couldn't concentrate on the conversation. He uncrossed his legs, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

When he heard Aki's distinctive scream again, at first, he couldn't quite believe it.

Iason glanced at him, looking decidedly annoyed.

"I'll take care of it," Lord Ghan replied, leaping up. "He isn't usually like this."

"I should hope not," Iason replied. "I won't tolerate that sort of behavior."

"Nor will I," Omaki assured him, unbuckling his belt. "He's in for it now."

The Blondie rushed down the stairs, his belt now firmly in hand, furious. Why hadn't Aki listened to him? Now he would be forced to discipline him on this day, of all days. He strode through the great

hall, and then began jogging down the corridor when he heard Aki's screaming increase.

Aki was about to get a good, hard whipping—that much the Blondie knew. Omaki clutched the belt, fully prepared to give the boy a lesson he would never forget, when a scene appeared before him he could not quite believe.

Enyu was chasing Aki around the pool, both of them completely naked, the Xeronian fully erect.

"Enyu!" he bellowed.

His pet looked toward him, and then ignored him, continuing to pursue Aki, who was now screaming hysterically.

"He's trying to *ravage* me!"

Omaki rushed toward Enyu, grabbing him and holding him against his body, still holding his belt in one hand. "What is *wrong* with you? Stop it!"

At first Enyu struggled desperately, but then, feeling his Master's erection against his buttocks, he relaxed. "Fuck me," he pleaded, in Xeronian. "Please, Master."

"Are you...*in your interval*?" Omaki asked, confused. "This isn't your time, is it?"

"Oh, Master! I'll do anything you like. Let me suck you."

"Juthian, where can I chain him up?"

"Master Iason has a T-stand in his room," Juthian suggested. "Or there's Riki's post, in the great hall."

Enyu rubbed his body back against his Master. "I can feel you, Master. You're ready for me."

"Hush," Omaki whispered, though his horny little pet was quite right. He *was* ready for Enyu, and now he just wanted to find somewhere private to unleash his pent-up lust. He picked Enyu up, carting him off toward Iason's bedroom.

Riki, Kahlan and Katze were on the balcony, smoking, when they saw Omaki stride past them, carrying the naked pet.

"Did you see that?" Riki demanded. "That was catboy!"

Katze frowned, puzzled. "What is going on?"

"Let's find out." Riki tossed his smoke over the ledge and then hurried inside, watching with utter delight as Omaki put Enyu in the

T-stand.

“That’s odd,” Katze remarked. “He’s rutting.”

Omaki turned and, seeing his audience, fumbled with the control panel. The door hummed shut.

“Speaking of rutting, I’m horny as hell,” the mongrel announced, eyeing Kahlan.

“Me too,” Kahlan confessed, confused.

Katze frowned, hearing something that, at first, he thought he was imagining.

“Where’s that moaning coming from?” Riki asked, looking around.

Katze turned on his heels and strode toward Daryl’s room, entering and then standing in the doorway, hands on his hips.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

Daryl was on the bed, pants pulled down to his ankles, wearing the forbidden strap-on G-wave device, thrusting into the air. “Please,” Daryl pleaded, “just let me come.”

“I don’t think so. Take that off, this instant!”

“Please!”

“*Now*, Daryl! I told you, you can’t use that anymore! Heiku says that’s very dangerous!”

“I don’t care!”

“That’s it.” Katze stepped forward and removed the device, throwing it across the room. It hit the wall, shattering.

“You broke it! Dammit, Katze!”

Furious, the eunuch lunged forward, grabbing Daryl and struggling with him for a few moments before managing to get him over his knee.

“You are going to learn to listen to me, Daryl.”

“Leave me alone!”

“This is fucking *serious*! I told you, you can’t play around with this stuff, especially *you*. Your system can’t take it. You’re going to listen to me when I tell you not to do something.” With that, Katze began to spank him.

Daryl was so surprised that at first, he was completely silent, stunned. Then he began to yelp and kick his legs, deciding that being spanked was not nearly as fun as he had always imagined it would be.

“Stop!” he pleaded. “I won’t do it again!”

“No, you won’t.”

“Ow! *Owww!*”

“Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“I couldn’t help it, honestly! *Please*, Katze!”

“Are you going to mind me?”

“Yes!”

“Hmmm. Let’s be sure.” With that, the eunuch gave him a few especially hard smacks, and then stopped, satisfied that he had gotten his point across.

“Everyone’s watching us,” Daryl whispered, mortified.

Katze looked up and realized he had failed to shut the door.

Meanwhile, in Iason’s bedroom, Omaki had Enyu fully restrained in the T-stand. “I made it clear to you that you are to *keep away from Aki*,” he scolded, unleashing his belt on the Xeronian’s backside.

Enyu, as might be expected, yelped and struggled against his restraints, unhappy that the Blondie had chosen to punish him with his belt. However, though he genuinely felt his Master’s arm, he nevertheless retained his erection for the duration of his punishment, much to Lord Ghan’s surprise.

Omaki, for his part, was aroused beyond bearing, and finally tossed the belt aside. He removed his gloves, running his fingers teasingly up and down the Xeronian’s body.

“Oooo Master! Please touch me.”

“I *am* touching you,” came the Blondie’s saucy reply.

“Touch my cock!”

“If I touch you there, you’ll release, and I don’t want you to come yet.”

“You’re *torturing* me!”

The Blondie moved close behind Enyu, pushing his hair aside to bare and then bite his throat. “I enjoy torturing you,” he answered, unfastening his trousers.

“Then, fuck me!” Enyu pleaded.

“Oh, I assure you, I will,” Omaki promised, inserting a finger into the Xeronian’s portal. “But I’m warning you, I’m especially engorged just now, and I’m going to fuck you senseless.”

Enyu gasped, thrilled with his Master's attitude.

Lord Ghan released his cock from his trousers, sliding it between Enyu's buttocks. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready! Fuck me, Master!"

The Blondie removed his finger and put his hands firmly on his hips, sinking partway into him with a shudder and deep groan. "Mercy," he whispered, his eyes rolling back.

Enyu cried out, wincing and instinctively thrusting his hips forward in an attempt to escape the Blondie's painful girth.

"I thought you *wanted* to be fucked," Omaki remarked, breathing deeply as he forced the Xeronian's hips back and wiggled in a bit further.

"I do," Enyu gasped.

"Then quit fighting me."

Enyu tried to relax, desperately wanting to be fucked and yet a bit overcome, as usual, with the initial pain of penetration.

The Blondie reached around, his fingers gently encircling Enyu's shaft.

"Oh yes! Yes, Master! Please keep doing that!"

"Do you mean *this*?" Lord Ghan teased, giving him a hard thrust and nearly achieving full penetration, "or *this*?" Now he began slowly stroking his erection.

"Oh!"

Omaki sunk his teeth into Enyu's neck again, eliciting another gasp from the Xeronian. "You're always so delightfully perfect and *tight*, my pet," he groaned, pumping him a little faster.

"I'm going to come!"

"Yes," Omaki hissed. "I want to hear you, pet. Come *now*."

Enyu complied, unleashing a spine-chilling sex cry as his semen exploded from his cock and sprayed everywhere—up his abdomen and down the Blondie's hand.

"Mmmm. Yessss. That's very erotic."

Lord Ghan spread his legs apart a bit more, impaling Enyu on his cock, finally forcing him to take his entire length. Grinning, he gave into his desires and rocked against his spent pet without restraint, taking advantage of Enyu's relaxed state to take him as hard as he

wanted. It was not long before he felt his own ascent beginning.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned. This was the Blondie’s last comment on the subject of their union; he was so overcome with the subsequent pleasure that washed over him that he was rendered completely silent, his body shuddering and twitching as his hot sex gushed into his pet’s delightfully restrictive sanctum.

In all his days, Omaki could not remember an orgasm more pleasurable than the one he there experienced with Enyu in Iason’s penthouse.



“OMAKI SURE IS TAKING A LONG TIME,” Heiku remarked.

“Maybe we should get back to the party,” Xian suggested, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

“Is it just me, or does anyone else think there’s something in the punch?” Raoul asked finally.

Everyone looked at Iason, who frowned, staring at his own empty glass, and suddenly realizing what seemed so familiar about the taste. “Oh, dear.”

“What?” Lord Am was frowning as well.

“Tarnacsian cider!” Iason answered, his eyes flashing. “I’ll have Tai’s skin for this.”

“Tar—what did you call it?”

“It’s...if I’m right, there’s been a terrible mistake. This is a potent aphrodisiac.”

“Well, that explains it,” Heiku nodded. “I had about four cups of it.”

“As did I,” Lord Am growled. “No wonder my suit is about to burst open.”

“Everyone was drinking it.” Lord Sami stood up, suddenly worried about Juthian.

“We’d better go back downstairs,” Iason agreed, rising, realizing then the potential for disaster.

Raoul and Xian followed him, but when Yousi stood up, Heiku reached out and stayed him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Where are you going, Yousi?” he whispered.

Yousi turned around, eyes wide.

Downstairs, it looked as though the penthouse had been turned upside down. Sarius and Kahlan were fighting, while Ru and Juthian were trying to break them up, Aki and Suuki were running through the great hall, naked and dripping wet, Ayuda was kissing Toma, and Tai was standing in the foyer, watching the unfolding drama with a look of utter confusion on his face.

“Where’s Yui?” Lord Am demanded, though he was ignored by everyone.

Iason strode over to Tai, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and lifting him off the ground. “What did you put in the punch?”

“N-nothing! It’s just...regular punch!”

“It’s *Tarnacsian cider*! I can taste it!”

“But it can’t be! I...” Now Tai suddenly quieted, the blood draining from his face. “The ice! It’s the *ice*! We must have used that frozen Tarnacsian cider by mistake!”

Lord Mink sighed, setting him back on the ground. It was apparent enough to him that the Aristian had certainly not *intended* to serve the potent cider to his guests. “What can we do to stop it?”

Tai shook his head. “There isn’t anything we can do. We’ll just have to let it run its course.”

Iason shook a finger in his face. “I’m not finished with you,” he warned, turning sharply on his heels.

The full effect of the cider now suddenly seemed to hit Lord Sami, and he seized Juthian, dragging him over to the dining room table.

“*Master!* What are you doing?” Juthian cried, as the Blondie threw him facedown over the table and began unfastening the front of his bodysuit.

“That much should be obvious,” Xian replied, his voice shaking with lust.

Lord Mink passed by them without even trying to stop the Blondie, making for his bedroom, but when he opened the door and beheld Omaki and Enyu in his bed, he turned back, not even bothering to close the door.

He hurried down the corridor toward Riki’s room, hoping to find

his pet there, Raoul close on his heels.

"If he's with Yui, I'll kill him," Lord Am announced.

"You'll not touch him, Raoul," Iason shot back, though he increased his pace, equally worried about this possible scenario.

When he reached Riki's room he found the door open. Both Blondies rushed in, but after a quick search they discovered the mongrel, alone, naked on his bed but for his golden collar.

"Where's Yui?" Lord Am barked.

"Fuck if I know! Get the hell out!" Riki cried, pumping himself desperately. He turned to Iason, his eyes wild and dilated. "The ring! *Please*, I need to come!"

Raoul frowned and left, while Iason made his way over to the bed, stripping off his cape and gloves as he walked.

"Oh yeah," Riki moaned, watching him with delight. "I need a good fucking!"

"You shall have it," Lord Mink replied, through clenched teeth.

In truth, the Blondie was now so aroused he could hardly think straight. He managed to remove his boots and his bodysuit and, finally naked, straddled his pet, rocking up teasingly against Riki's swollen cock.

"Kiss me," Riki pleaded.

Iason needed no further encouragement. He repositioned himself, lying on top of his pet and kissing him so passionately that he bruised the mongrel's mouth. Neither of them felt they could get enough of the other. They rolled around on the bed, groping each other frantically.

"Iason. Please...suck me."

The Blondie smiled, dragging his tongue all the way down the mongrel's body until he reached his twitching erection, which he began exploring eagerly with his mouth.

"Oh, yeah!" Riki cried, thrusting into his mouth, his excitement mounting. "Aww...you're fucking amazing! Shit! I'm going to come fast!"

Almost as soon as he said the words, the mongrel ejaculated, giving his Blondie Master a mouthful of his hot sex. Iason gazed up at him with lust-filled eyes, a trickle of semen dripping from his lips. He

repositioned himself, pushing Riki's legs back toward his shoulders and getting up onto his knees as he grabbed the mongrel's wrists and pinned them to the bed.

"I'm taking you *hard*," he warned, and then, almost as if his body moved beyond his control, he was inside his pet, Riki's muscles clenching him gloriously.

"Oh, pet!" he gasped, surprised at how easily he slid inside the mongrel, seeing as he had not even taken the time to lubricate himself.

Riki grinned. "I got ready for you," he explained, motioning toward the long, well-lubricated sex toy now sitting on the bedside table. "I was hoping you would come to me."

"Good boy," Iason hissed, holding his wrists firmly against the bed as he proceeded to take him with all his Blondie might. He pushed against Riki's legs to accomplish even deeper penetration, the sweat from his efforts dripping down onto his pet's face.

"You're doing it!" the mongrel exclaimed. "You're making that...little sneer. That's sexy as hell!"

Excited beyond bearing, Iason was gasping and grunting with each thrust, until finally he let out a long, low moan that sent shivers down Riki's back.

And the Commander's.

Voshka Khosi leaned against the doorway, grinning, his arms crossed on his chest. "You do know how to throw a party, Iason. Looks like I'm just in time for the party games."

"Fuck," Riki whispered, biting his lip. "I'm getting *another* erection!"

Iason's Punch

LORD MINK WITHDREW, STILL BREATHING DEEPLY from his exertions as he released his grip on Riki's wrists. Though he had just climaxed, he was not completely spent, his cock already betraying his interest in Riki's provocative gaze.

"Look at you. You're ready for round two," the mongrel commented, stroking his own developing erection eagerly as he regarded the Blondie's obvious arousal.

"So it seems."

"Please tell me you're going to invite me in," Voshka purred, eyeing the naked couple with delight from the doorway, where he continued to lean against the doorframe.

"I don't understand why I'm so turned on," Riki gasped, licking his lips as he regarded the Commander.

"Perhaps I won't wait for an invitation," Voshka drawled, slipping off his boots and then his cape and shirt.

The mongrel eyed his body with unconcealed interest, his lips parted. Iason turned his head, just in time to watch the Commander unzip his pants and pull out his cock. The handsome man continued to stand, feet shoulder width apart, stroking himself openly as he regarded them.

"I'm not sure what's going on at your little party, Iason, but I'm in favor of it, on general principle," Voshka remarked, his eyes twinkling mischievously. His gaze ran the length of the Blondie's backside.

"This seems like the perfect time to make you scream. I promised you I would, didn't I? What do you say, Riki? Want to help me send Iason to the stars? I know just how to make him sing."

Lord Mink quivered, wanting to object but at the same time finding himself unaccountably eager for the Commander's promised attentions. Without even meaning to he pushed his knees a little wider, offering himself.

"That's it," Voshka encouraged, slowly walking toward him. "Stay up on your hands and knees, but spread your legs wider for me. You know what I'm going to do, don't you? Once I have you clutching the sheets, Riki is going to service you. Aren't you, Riki?"

The mongrel shrugged. "Sure. But I want to come, too."

"After we finish with Iason, you can do whatever you like."

Riki blinked. "*Anything?* Can I fuck you?"

"Yes," Voshka answered, moving into position behind Iason.

"Seriously?"

The Blondie frowned and was about to protest when Voshka pressed his ass cheeks apart and unleashed his lingual arts. Lord Mink moaned, closing his eyes.

"I *love* the way you moan," the Commander exclaimed, wiggling his tongue vigorously over Iason's perineum.

"Oh, Vosh!"

"You're completely erect again, Iason," Riki noted, reaching out to fondle the Blondie.

"Now it's time for something a little more *intimate*," the Commander whispered, as he put his mouth over Iason's portal and snaked his tongue up inside him.

Lord Mink made a strangled sound, gasping. "Oh!" he cried, over and over, his eyes rolling back.

"You look so sexy right now," Riki panted, fondling himself eagerly. "I'm guessing you're ready for me now, huh?"

Iason opened his eyes to watch the mongrel reposition himself beneath him, his entire body shaking when Riki took his cock into his mouth.

"Oh, Riki! Oh, pet!"

The dual stimulation of Voshka Khosi's rimming and Riki's fellatio

was almost more than the Blondie could bear. Since he had just come only moments before, he was able to hold his seed longer than he otherwise might have. The Commander had been quite accurate in his assessment of how the Blondie would respond: Iason wailed and moaned the entire time, clutching the sheets beneath him as he wiggled and rocked alternately against the two mouths that pleased him so exquisitely.

When Lord Mink finally began to climax, Voshka wasted no time. He rose up and jabbed his cock where his tongue had been, grunting his excitement like a wild animal as he penetrated the great Blondie. As soon as he was inside him, the Commander let loose a fierce cry, sounding as though he were in anguish. Already Iason was clamped against him and squeezing hard, and Voshka, too aroused to draw things out, could only whimper helplessly as Lord Mink milked him.

The mongrel eagerly swallowed Iason's cum, as he held his ready erection gingerly with one hand, half afraid of prematurely relinquishing his seed. The sounds of pleasure Voshka and Iason were making were extraordinarily stimulating, making his task difficult. Somehow he managed to pour oil onto his cock without ejaculating, though he clenched his teeth as he lubricated himself, his hand sliding over his engorged member with tentative, careful strokes.

As soon as the Commander climaxed, Riki was ready. He got up and the minute Voshka withdrew from Iason, he was behind him, ready to penetrate.

"My turn," he announced breathlessly, eyeing the Commander's ass.

"Yes, yes," Voshka agreed, still in the wake of his rapture. "How would you like me?"

"Bend over, with your head down on the bed," the mongrel replied.

"Like this?" the Commander offered himself, looking behind him with a knowing smile.

"Yes! Just like that! Oh!" Riki was inside him in a flash, penetrating as hard as he could. "You're not a virgin," he remarked, panting.

"No," Voshka laughed. "Were you expecting me to be?"

"I was hoping it would *hurt*."

“Were you, now? Doesn’t it feel good?”

“It does,” Riki admitted, closing his eyes. “Ha! I’m fucking Commander Khosi up the ass!”

“Riki,” Iason scolded.

Grinning, the mongrel proceeded to fuck the Commander for all he was worth.

“Mmmm,” Voshka purred. “You feel good, Riki.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yes. I’d like to try this again sometime *before* I’ve already spent myself.”

“All right,” Riki agreed eagerly.

“I don’t know about that,” Iason objected, frowning.

“Though what I’d *really* like,” Voshka continued, “is to feel *you* inside me, Iason. I bet that’s quite spectacular, a cock as big as that.”

“That wouldn’t be my word for it,” the mongrel remarked wryly.

“Give me a few minutes, and I’m sure I could accommodate you,” Lord Mink replied, fondling himself.

“Oh yes? I like it *hard*.”

“Aren’t I fucking you hard enough?” Riki demanded.

“You’re doing a splendid job. You’ve split me open, no question.”

“Oh fuck. I’m going to come,” the mongrel wailed, losing his seed with a few frantic, last-minute thrusts. “Oh shit! Fuck, that feels good! Oh, yeah!”

Riki gave Voshka a few more thrusts before finally withdrawing and collapsing on the bed.

“Don’t move, Vosh,” Iason commanded, taking the mongrel’s place behind the Commander.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Voshka whispered, looking back at him invitingly.

The Blondie took a moment to lubricate his organ, one hand on Voshka’s ass. “You want it hard, you said? I don’t think you realize who you’re talking to.” Lord Mink held his erection up for the man to see, smiling at his reaction.

“It does look bigger than I remembered,” the Commander admitted.

“Let’s see if it fits.” With that, Iason squeezed himself inside

Voshka Khosi, surprised when the man only groaned and wiggled back against him. "Oh, Iason. You fill me completely!"

"You like that, do you?"

"I do! Fuck me, Iason! Fuck me *hard*!"

Lord Mink, quivering head to toe, was only too happy to oblige him, sinking his phallus into the Commander's ass over and over. Unlike Riki, Voshka seemed only too willing to take his full length, making no attempt to move out of position. If anything, he *encouraged* Iason to take him without restraint, and the Blondie, having enjoyed few such opportunities for unfettered coital plunder in his lifetime, and being still quite stimulated from the Tarnacsian cider, enjoyed a fuck that was truly unparalleled.

"Oh, Vosh," he groaned.

"I'm enjoying this," Voshka sighed, reaching between his legs to fondle himself. "At this rate, I think I may come again! Riki!"

"Huh?" the mongrel murmured, keeping his eyes closed.

"Come over here and suck me!"

"I'm too relaxed," Riki protested.

"At least move under me so I can come on your face!"

"Oh, all right," the mongrel sighed, agreeably crawling under him.

"Heavens, what a glorious fuck!" Voshka proclaimed. "Please, Riki, just lick me a little—*yes!!* That's it!! Oh, Iason, I *do* love the way you fuck me! Yes, I like that little wiggle you do when you're deep inside me!"

Lord Mink shuddered, closing his eyes. *Yes, he was just on the brink!* "Sweet Jupiter," he groaned, as he climaxed.

"Here I come," the Commander announced before promptly splattering his seed over the mongrel's mouth and chin. "Ah, what a sight! What a handsome face you have, Riki! I love seeing my cum all over it! Oh, I am undone!"

After this, the three of them lay on the bed, panting.

Voshka was the first to rise. "I need a drink," he gasped.

"After where your tongue has been, I should not be surprised," Lord Mink remarked wryly.

"I'm not complaining, mind you," the Commander answered, giving him a wink.

Riki sat up. "There's a full bar, Vosh, help yourself. If you want a cold drink, though, you'll have to go to the kitchen."

"I'll go to the kitchen, then."

"I need to wash up," the mongrel murmured, wiping his face with the back of his arm.

"I could use a little freshening up myself," Voshka agreed.

The two of them cleaned themselves off in the mongrel's bath hall, exchanging friendly smiles as they did so.

The Commander quickly dressed, deciding that, much as he might want to, roaming through the penthouse completely naked was probably not conducive to his maintaining any semblance of authority or leadership.

Lord Mink finally got up when Riki returned to the bed. "I shall take a quick shower," he announced.

"Hmmm." The Commander, who had been tugging on his boots, paused for a moment. "Perhaps I'm being too hasty in getting dressed? I do love a good fuck in the shower. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I'm spent. It will take me a good half hour before I'm ready again."

"I'm getting another erection," Riki remarked casually, lying on the bed with his arms behind his head. "There must have been something in that punch."

"I shall investigate," Voshka decided. "I will seek out this punch of which you speak, and drink as much of it as I can, to catch up with you. How many cups did you have?"

"I don't know. Five or six."

"I will return, and then we shall proceed with round three, no? I'd like to see both of you servicing me at once. And perhaps I'll fuck you this time, Riki." With a smart clip of his heels, the Commander left the room.

Lord Mink emerged from the bath hall, dripping wet.

"You look sexy," Riki remarked with a grin. "Vosh is going after the punch. He says he's coming back for round three."

Iason answered this by walking over to the door and then, with a meaningful smile, activating the door-lock button on the control panel.

The door hummed shut.

"Awww, you're locking the Commander out, huh?"

"Yes. I've had my fill of him for today. Right now, I only want *you*."

The Blondie climbed onto the bed and began slinking toward his pet like a great wildcat, eyes bright with lust.

Riki got up on his knees, stroking his new erection eagerly.

"So...what the fuck is going on anyway? Did Tai spike the punch with that cider or what?"

"Apparently. Turn over on your stomach," Iason commanded.

"How about *you* get on *your* stomach?" Riki countered.

"Obey me, pet." Lord Mink suddenly felt overwhelmed with desire for the mongrel, the cider now making his blood run hot. He was in no mood for argument; he was ready for another good fucking and wasn't about to be put off from this task.

"Come on," Riki pleaded. "My ass is still sore. How about I get a turn? Let *me* give you a wicked-nice tongue-fucking. You know you want it. I can do a better job than Vosh—I know just how you like it. Remember?"

At this, Iason hesitated, admittedly tempted by the proposal. Sensing the Blondie's interest, Riki illustrated his offer by flicking his tongue across his own lips, gifting his Master with a drop-dead sexy gaze, eyes smoldering dark with lust.

"I want to taste you. Let me make you moan. Just like this—my hot wet tongue slithering deep inside your—"

"Very well," Iason interrupted, his heart accelerating at his pet's mongrel-style provocation.

"Yes!" Triumphant, Riki leapt off the bed, and then pointed to it, moving around to the foot of the bed. "Get on your knees, legs apart, and put your head down on the bed."

The Blondie obeyed, offering him such an enticing view that Riki almost whimpered. It was not only the intimacy of the pose but also the hints of Iason's earlier discipline that made him especially pleasing to the mongrel: all along the Blondie's legs and buttocks, visible marks of his punishment still lingered on his otherwise flawless skin.

"Fuck. You have no idea how bloody sexy you look," Riki

whispered. "Arch your back a bit more."

Iason did so, and Riki groaned, pumping himself.

"Get on with it," Lord Mink snapped, impatient now for stimulation and release. He'd never felt so aroused in his entire life: it was almost unbearable, and Riki's groans weren't helping. It was difficult to believe he'd ejaculated but moments before—*twice*, when he felt as though he hadn't come in weeks.

"Blondies sure are grumpy when they're horny," the mongrel muttered, though he obliged him by moving behind him on the bed on his own knees. Taking hold of his cheeks, he gently spread him apart, touching his tongue tentatively to the Blondie's pink portal.

Lord Mink rewarded him with a low moan, arching back against his tongue. Riki pulled back, grinning.

"You liked that, did you?"

"Don't stop," Iason commanded, sharply. "Don't tease me, pet."

"No?" The mongrel tested this mandate by flicking his tongue lightly against the puckered flesh, and then pulling back again.

"Riki!"

"All right, all right. Just trying to have a little fun. Sheesh! You sure are uptight."

Lord Mink was about to offer a scathing reply when he was silenced by his pet's undeniably skilled lingual arts. He gripped the sheets with both his hands, gritting his teeth, gasping and almost choking on his own moans as the mongrel proceeded to stimulate him in precisely the ways he liked best, exploring his entire perineum and then thrusting his tongue up mercilessly inside him.

"Good pet," he praised. "That's very good, Riki...*ohhhh!*"

The mongrel withdrew for a moment. "Better than the Commander?"

"Please don't stop, love," Iason begged. "Yes, yes, much better!"

Riki grinned and continued his project, reaching around to stroke Iason's matured erection, which twitched impatiently against his hand. Unable to resist, the mongrel withdrew again, and then whispered, "I'll keep going, but you have to call me *Master* Riki first."

"Riki!"

"Say it!"

Exasperated, Iason answered this by turning around and flipping the mongrel onto the bed. "I'm in no mood for games," he warned. He rose and stood at the foot of the bed, arms across his chest as though trying to decide what to do first.

Riki laughed at his expression. "Yes, *Master*," he replied mockingly. "I beg your pardon, *Master*. Would you like me to suck your massive cock now, *Master*?"

The Blondie regarded him for a moment, softening at his playful, impish grin. "What I want," he replied, his voice low and quivering with desire, "is for you to obey me, *pet*, and do exactly as I say."

The mongrel quieted, studying him. The Blondie was—he realized, finally—in full Master mode, which meant he would have his way in everything. He continued to stand at the foot of the bed, now coaxing his erection to maturity. His elongated cock, swollen to an almost frightening girth, was so engorged that the tip curved slightly inward.

It had been a long time since he had witnessed Iason so aroused or so intense, his raging lust spilling over into his eyes, into his features, even into his voice. Especially considering the fact that Iason had already climaxed twice, Riki almost felt afraid of him; but then, it was difficult to be anything but stimulated, at the moment.

Perhaps because he knew, in his heart, that Iason loved him, Riki no longer truly feared him anymore, no matter how angry he became—with a few exceptions, such as when the Blondie had recently punished him for running away. Whatever he had in mind, the mongrel knew he would find pleasure in it, at least at some point. That had been a brutal truth from his very first days in Eos. Even when Lord Mink *forced* him to bend to his will, his submission was always entangled with acquiescence, sweetened by the Blondie's undeniable skills in the art of sensual pleasure.

He lay back on the bed, a curious half-smile twisting his lips, as he contemplated what Iason might have in mind next. "All right. You win. What do you want?"

Lord Mink returned the smile, moving over to the side of the bed and retrieving the initialed cuffs and chains Riki had removed and left on the floor. He held them up. "Put these back on."

Riki shrugged, sitting up to obey.

“Hold out your wrists.”

The mongrel did so, and Iason cuffed him, and then sat down next to him on the bed, his fingers toying with the chain that hung between the gold-plated cuffs.

“I love that you wore these, Riki,” he said finally, “earlier, this evening. Why did you put them on?”

“I figured you’d like that.”

“Then, you did it to please me?” The Blondie’s gaze was so intense that Riki shivered.

“Yeah, I guess. Well...and, I liked the note.”

For a moment Lord Mink looked puzzled. “The note?”

“The note you left—never mind. Forget it.” Embarrassed, the mongrel found his cheeks flushing hot as he squirmed under Iason’s scrutiny.

Laughing softly as he realized what his pet referred to, Iason reached out and tipped his chin up with his fingers, encouraging his attention. “You mean to tell me, all I had to do was leave a note, for that demonstration of your submission to me?”

Riki scowled. “Not exactly. I said forget it!”

“Don’t tell me I’ve finally tamed you, my naughty little pet?”

At this, Riki jerked away from his touch, annoyed. “I’m not an animal to be tamed! Why are you always—”

His tirade was cut short by the Blondie’s insistent kiss, a kiss so passionate and demanding that it left him breathless when at last Iason pulled away.

“Lie back on the bed now.”

“Taming...taming is for animals. I’m not an animal.” The protest came out almost as a whimper as Riki slowly eased back on the bed. His heart was beating so hard in his chest that he felt he could hardly breathe. He was aroused, excited, angry, and a bit anxious—for some inexplicable reason—all at once.

“Taming is for pets,” Lord Mink corrected. “And you *are* my pet, Riki.” He moved up beside him on the bed, one hand caressing the mongrel’s deeply tanned, inner thigh.

Riki closed his eyes, giving into the pleasure of his Master’s knowing touch.



RAOUL SEARCHED THE PENTHOUSE with growing concern, anxious to resolve the whereabouts of Yui. He cursed under his breath, not even completely sure *who* he was cursing, though one thing was certain: whoever he found with Yui would not live long to tell about it. He would tear that miserable creature limb from limb!

“Yui!” he called out again, angrily, banging on random doors in his desperation to locate his newly restored would-be pet. A faint, muffled moan answered him and Raoul froze, turning his head one way and the next to determine the direction from which the sound emanated.

“Answer me!” he bellowed. “Answer me this moment, Yui!”

Once again he discerned a faint moan, and this time he felt sure he recognized the voice as belonging to Yui. He turned, strode down the hall and stood poised outside one of the rooms, listening. A third moan confirmed his suspicions.

“Open!” he commanded, actually surprised when the door immediately hummed open. In fact, all the doors within the penthouse were still programmed to accept Raoul’s voice commands, though he had no way of knowing this. He rushed into the room and found—much to his initial relief—that Yui was in the room alone. Less pleasing to the great Blondie was the discovery that he was sitting on the edge of the bed, pants unzipped, fondling himself.

He came to a dead stop, hands on his hips. “What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded. “Why didn’t you answer me when I called you?”

“Why do you care?” Yui gasped, with uncharacteristic defiance, his eyes gleaming angrily. “Why don’t you go play with your new pet?”

For a moment Lord Am stared back at him in utter disbelief. It was completely unlike Yui to challenge him in any way, and to be openly rebellious was almost...unthinkable. But while the Blondie felt an instinctive sting of anger in response to his defiance, at the same time he couldn’t help but be a little pleased over Yui’s obvious jealousy.

More than this, however, the cider was now effecting a rather

demanding tightening of his loins that, in concert with Yui's rather unabashed performance, managed to make the Blondie's head spin with thoughts of ravishing him then and there.

But Yui's challenge could not go unanswered, and Raoul had always been one to insist on obedience when it came to members of his household. He knew that the first order of business was to settle on a punishment befitting of Yui's transgression. Lord Am was a firm believer that punishment ought to be administered on the spot, as soon as disobedience was discovered, no matter what the circumstances. He *should* have given Yui a taming when he had openly defied him earlier in the evening—in the company of Blondies, no less—but he would not make that error again.

He moved toward a vase of long, stiff *yewshi* reeds apparently meant as a decoration for the room, and selected one of the reeds, whacking it against his hand to test its suitability for discipline.

"First, you challenged me openly in the presence of other Blondies," he replied, his voice barely concealing his anger, "and then you failed to answer my summons."

Yui watched Raoul with a growing sense of dread. He knew that look on his Master's face—he had seen it often enough, when one of his many pets had been foolish enough to cull his disfavor. It was an uncompromising look that meant punishment was forthcoming.

"Then," the Blondie continued, "I find you in here, fondling yourself, and you defy me once again, addressing me in a manner most unfitting of your station and, more importantly, displeasing to me."

Lord Am walked slowly toward Yui, whose eyes had opened wide upon apprehending what he had in mind. In that instant the attendant suddenly seemed to remember that Raoul was a *Blondie*—a great, immensely strong, decidedly intimidating Blondie—who certainly had no obligation to even give Yui the time of day. He gazed at the long reed that Raoul now tapped against his leg, realizing, too late, his peril.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Raoul demanded, as he stopped in front of him.

Yui, who had always been the perfect model of obedience, was

quick to assume a look of contrition, his cheeks flushing pink. "I am...s-s-sorry, Master."

Lord Am managed to suppress a smile at Yui's unhesitating submission: it was one of the things he had always liked about the quiet, agreeable young man. His rebellion, surprising in and of itself, was predictably short-lived, and now Yui's fearful expression and trembling was exactly what Raoul had hoped for.

Even so, it wasn't enough.

"Lower your pants, Yui, and stand up against the wall, facing it. I've never had to discipline you before, but, unfortunately, you're about to find out what happens when you truly displease me."

"Yes, Master," Yui muttered, miserably making his way over to the wall and then letting his breeches fall to his thighs. He kept his head bowed, shamed that his Master was about to punish him. It was the first time Yui had received punishment—other than a game—at Lord Am's hand, and he felt mortified to have earned it.

"Put your hands over your head, against the wall."

"I won't do it again, Master," Yui said weakly, as he obeyed.

"No, you won't."

"Please," he whispered, his voice wavering when Raoul placed his own hand over his, pinning his hands to the wall, "you don't *have* to punish me. I'll be good, from now on. I promise!"

"What sort of Master would I be, if I *didn't* punish you, Yui?" Raoul pressed the cool reed against the young man's bare bottom, eliciting frightened tears from the trembling youth. "I've always made it clear to you that I expect...*perfect obedience*. Isn't that true?"

"Yes, Master!"

"I won't tolerate anything less. Have you forgotten I am your Master?"

"No, Master," Yui whimpered, terrified by the way Raoul spoke to him and the way he taunted him with the cane, tapping it threateningly against his bared flesh.

Raoul had never seen Yui in such a state. He found, in concert with the potent aphrodisiac coursing through his blood, that the attendant's pleas were disconcertingly arousing.

He was enjoying every moment of it.

“Your mouth remembers. I’ll have your body remember now.”

With that, Lord Am gave Yui a caning he would never thereafter forget. Although it was far less than the Blondie was capable of administering, to Yui, who had never really been punished before, the experience was beyond anything he could have imagined.

His cries betrayed his anguish as strike after strike met with his exposed flesh; his thighs and buttocks were covered with angry cane marks, reddening and welting quickly under his Master’s firm arm.

Amidst Yui’s tears and pleas for a cessation to the punishment, Raoul finally delivered his last punishing strike, but continued to keep the attendant pinned to the wall.

He tossed the cane to the side and stood behind Yui, waiting for him to calm and his tears to subside. His erection was so stiff that he could barely restrain himself from taking the young man on the spot. The sight of Yui’s bared ass, so newly punished, proved irresistible; he removed a glove with his teeth and began caressing the reddened flesh, and then squeezing his plump cheeks.

Yui cringed when Raoul first touched his sensitive skin but quieted as his Master continued to grope him.

“I purchased the pet on Iason’s advice,” Raoul whispered, his voice now gentle and soothing, “for appearances only. You know how Eos is with regard to gossip. You haven’t anything to be jealous about.”

“I wasn’t...jealous,” Yui protested, sniffing.

Raoul smiled. “I think you were. But I rather liked that.” He moved his hand around to Yui’s hip, his fingers inching closer to his newly restored “prize.” He was anxious to touch Yui but, at the same time, hesitant to rush into it. “I wasn’t angry because of that. It was the way you spoke to me. You know I won’t tolerate that.”

Yui was shivering from the Blondie’s touch. “I know,” he nodded. “I’m not sure what got into me. Please forgive me, Master. It won’t happen again.”

“It had better not,” Raoul warned, though in a softer voice, almost teasing him. “You’re my secret pet, Yui. My *real* pet. But I thought we might *both* enjoy watching him perform. Wouldn’t you like that?”

The Blondie had moved close behind him, and was whispering in his ear. This, and the powerful impact of the Tarnacsian cider now

reaching full manifestation, began to work its magic on Yui's newly revived member, which began to twitch and grow again.

"Perhaps," Yui conceded, although privately he had no desire whatsoever to watch another pet perform, nor did he particularly want his Master to enjoy such pleasures: he had spent enough years having to stand by jealously while the Blondie engaged in such activities and was in no hurry to repeat those scenarios again. He frowned. "You're...are you going to take him, too?"

Smiling, Raoul began to kiss Yui's neck, enjoying his obvious jealousy. "Would that please you?"

"No! I mean," Yui gasped, closing his eyes as the Blondie continued to kiss the side of his throat. "That is, I would rather you didn't."

"No? Why not, Yui?"

"Because I want it to be...just you and me."

"Hmmm." Lord Am was secretly delighted, though he planned to torment Yui relentlessly on this point. He had no plans whatsoever to pair with the new pet—in fact, that would defeat the whole purpose of acquiring him for the sake of appearances. But he was enjoying teasing the attendant, mostly because the young man's thoughts were so transparent.

Now, however, he was far too excited to continue down this path; he was desperate to explore his newly restored Yui, so desperate, in fact, that he was starting to tremble. With tentative fingers, he slid his hand over the young man's hipbone into the hollow there, and then, ever so gently, he began to stroke Yui's newfound erection.

"Oh, Yui," he breathed, closing his eyes. The attendant was fully sprung, his organ warm in his hand. "Why didn't you wait for me? Why did you come into this room alone?"

"I couldn't help it," Yui panted, eyes rolling back at his Master's experienced caress. "Riki says there might be something in the punch—everyone is feeling aroused."

"Yes," Raoul agreed. "Iason thought so, too. It was an accident, I believe."

"You were upstairs with the other Blondies. I didn't know what else to do. I only knew I had to do *something*. And I was afraid to stay

in the hall, once things spun out of control.”

“What happened?”

Yui shook his head. “Everything happened all at once. Sarius suddenly grabbed Ru and pushed him up against the wall, kissing him. Then Kahlan and he started fighting. Riki unzipped his pants and started fondling himself—that was right after Katze spanked Daryl. Aki and Suuki were running around naked, I’m not sure why, and that new guard, Ayuda, just walked up to Toma, dragged him off to a corner and started kissing him. Sir Omaki was taking his pet in Iason’s bedroom, and he didn’t even close the door. And your...your new pet...kept telling me he wanted more punch and this and that, and driving me crazy. I was confused about what was happening, so I thought it would be better if I found somewhere to be alone. I mean...*away*...from everything.”

“That was the right thing to do,” Lord Am praised, relieved that Yui had maintained enough of his senses to extricate himself from the unfolding mayhem.

Basking in his Master’s approval, Yui leaned back against him, smiling.

“Nevertheless, you should have answered me when I called for you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I guess I *was* jealous and a little angry.”

Yui hated the new pet already. He was haughty, puffed up with pride, and seemed to think Yui existed only to attend to his needs. While Yui knew that, as Raoul’s official attendant, this was *theoretically* true, he hated the pet’s attitude. Although this wasn’t the first time one of his Master’s acquisitions had treated him with such obvious disdain, Yui found the new boy’s manner particularly annoying.

“What’s his name?”

“Mmmm? I don’t know.” Raoul paused for a moment. “I haven’t really thought about it. I suppose Regiland would be a good name.”

Yui pouted at this, feeling it was far too grand a name for the pet. Regiland was the name of the legendary Prince of Sorbus, a semi-mythical kingdom believed to thrive after the fall of King Chunamenkahn, who ruled during the Vendel period on old Amoi.

Although Yui himself was also named after another legendary prince, the very idea that the new pet should garner such a lofty appellation made his stomach clench with jealousy.

"I don't like that name. How about...*Puki*," Yui suggested, remembering that Puki was the name of a particularly noxious plant that grew in the wastelands.

Raoul ignored this, having no interest whatsoever in what the new pet was named. He began fondling Yui with more insistence. "You're so ready, Yui; let's go lie down on the bed. Take off your pants completely. And from now on, I want you to wear your usual robe."

The boy acquiesced, kicking off the unwanted garment. It was one of the first times he had ever attempted to dress in anything other than the traditional long servant robe that Raoul had always insisted he wear. Although, at first, the Blondie had agreed to let him wear the more contemporary, form-fitting outfit to the party—mostly because it revealed Yui's admirable physique in a decidedly flattering, almost pet-isque way—he preferred the young man in the more conservative garment, if only because it offered immediate access to the goodies within, while hiding them from others.

Yui moved to the bed and lay down, still wearing his shirt.

"Take everything off."

Obedying, Yui unfastened the buckles that lined the front of his tunic, but before he could finish, Raoul was on the bed, kissing him and twisting his nipples, tearing the shirt from his body.

Yui gasped, and Lord Am took advantage of his open mouth by assaulting it with his tongue, kissing him deeply, passionately, so violently that he almost bruised him, all the while stroking the young man's rigid cock.

"Yui," he groaned, finally breaking away. "I wanted to pleasure you first, but I can't wait."

"That's okay. Do you want me to—"

Raoul answered him by flipping Yui onto his stomach, preparing him briefly with a wildly thrusting finger as he smoothed his own pre-ejaculatory seed over the tip of his erection. He felt almost dizzy with desire, his lust was so intense. The sight of Yui's ass, still ripe from punishment, was so stimulating that he felt he might release on the

spot. He withdrew his finger, offering his enormous organ as a more insistent substitute, entering him with a low, breathless groan.

Yui was tight. It had been some time since they had been together, and Raoul was beside himself with need. He abandoned all attempt at restraint and proceeded to thrust at will, so excited that he was grunting like an animal, and rather loudly, at that.

The attendant smiled at this, enjoying his Master's obvious pleasure. He also discovered that intercourse was different now that he was "fully equipped"—he found himself moaning and arching his back to relieve the pressure on his ready erection.

Perceiving his need, Raoul abruptly moved onto his side, pulling Yui back against him. He continued to thrust, reaching around to work him as he did so.

Yui responded to this by crying out with such intensity that Raoul nearly began his ascent. "Yui, that's so sexy," he panted.

"Master! I'm going to...*do* something!"

"Let it go," the Blondie encouraged. "Don't hold back."

"It feels so good! Ughn! *Aaaahhh!*"

Lord Am moaned his response, closing his eyes as he felt his own essence rising within. "Oh, Yui...you're so perfect."

At that moment, as though by some coital serendipity, both of them climaxed at precisely the same moment, their voices intertwined in an intimate song of lust and gratification.

Afterwards they lay on the bed together, each savoring the experience.

"Was it what you expected?" Raoul asked finally.

Yui shook his head. "I can't even describe it! It was incredible!" For the first time, Yui realized exactly what he had given up by becoming Lord Am's attendant and undergoing modification.

"You peaked quickly," the Blondie remarked.

"I know, and I feel...all tingly again."

"That's from the cider, but I'm glad. I want to explore you a bit more slowly."

They lay quietly for a few moments. Yui reached back to stroke the Blondie's hips, his fingers brushing over the branding scar where Iason had left his mark.

"Master?"

"Yes?"

"Do you still love Iason Mink?"

Raoul did not immediately reply, considering the question. It was an issue he had shoved to the back of his mind, too painful to address. Ever since the night at the Taming Tower when Iason had burned his initials into his flesh, he knew that their relationship had changed irrevocably. The punishment and branding had put a definitive end to his pursuit of the Blondie, but it would be a lie to say that he no longer had feelings for his old lover.

"Yes," he admitted, finally.

Disappointed, though not surprised, Yui was silent for a moment. Then, "You would go to him, wouldn't you, if he asked you?"

"That's never going to happen."

"But would you?"

The Blondie pulled him closer, wondering why he asked. "I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

It was partly true, and partly a lie. It was true he hadn't thought about it—he'd forced himself *not* to think about it—but it was a lie that he didn't know what he would do. Raoul knew he would go to Iason's bed in a heartbeat.

"I think you would," Yui said thoughtfully.

"We're finished talking about this," Lord Am announced. "I'm with *you*, now. And I'll tell you something: that was one of the best sexual experiences I've ever had, just now."

"But the *very* best was with Lord Mink?"

"Yui," Raoul scolded. "I told you, we're finished with that discussion."

Pouting, Yui was forced to drop the issue, but his heart ached. It wasn't as though he was surprised at his Master's answer or his evasiveness. It was just that he desperately wanted Raoul to love him—and *only* him—completely.

"Master?"

"Hmmm."

"I love you."

Lord Am smiled, closing his eyes and holding him close. "And I

love you, my little pet-attendant.”

Yui, thrilled with this answer, relaxed, forcing himself to put aside his darker thoughts and enjoy the moment.

His Master loved him. That was enough.



VOSHKA TURNED BACK AT THE SOUND OF THE DOOR humming shut and smiled, not at all put out by Iason’s rejection. Although he would have certainly enjoyed continuing their threesome, he was more than satisfied with their romp together thus far, and he understood that the Blondie might want to be alone with his pet. He was, in truth, looking forward to a night with his *own* new acquisition.

“Tonight, then?” he called out teasingly.

Anders had been waiting for him outside Riki’s room and immediately fell into step with him, frowning his disapproval. “This is nothing but pandemonium,” he declared. “I don’t feel it is safe for you to stay here, Commander.”

“Nonsense,” Voshka replied. “It’s just a wild party, perhaps a bit wilder than most. Personally, I’m thrilled. It’s usually nothing but long, dull dinners and stiff formalities for me these days. Believe me, Anders, I am enjoying myself thoroughly. Though I do confess, I am a bit curious as to what’s got into everyone. Did you find anything out?”

Anders nodded. “The punch was spiked with Tarnacsian cider.”

“Ah, that would explain it. Perhaps you ought to loosen up a bit and have a cup, Anders.”

“Sir?” The bodyguard blinked, unsure if he were serious.

“Why not? Goodness, I’m in no danger here, unless there’s any way a man can be fucked to death. Now, hand me that package I gave you.”

Anders dutifully surrendered the item, though he continued to frown. “Commander, I find it highly inappropriate—”

Voshka slapped him on the shoulder, giving him a shove toward the great hall. “Anders, go drink some punch. That’s an order.”

With that, the Commander slipped into his room, delighted to find Azka there, obviously waiting for him. The boy’s erection had

distorted the shape of his wrap, and the new pet, confused over his sudden, inexplicable lust, was perched on the edge of the bed, sitting on his hands to keep from touching himself.

"Master!" Relieved that the Commander had finally come, Azka beamed at him.

Voshka smiled. "Why are you sitting on your hands?"

"Oh! I have...a *problem*." Azka released his hands from the weight of his body, shaking them to encourage the blood flow. He glanced down at his erection, blushing.

"Hmmm. I see that. And, do you mean to tell me you've been sitting here all this time, not even touching yourself?"

"I wasn't sure if you would allow it, so I decided to wait for you."

"Good boy." Voshka approached him, holding up the bag he'd brought back from the convention center. "I have a present for you."

"A present?" Thrilled, Azka waited, eyeing the bag curiously.

"Or rather, a present for *me*, and you. A present for us both."

"What is it?"

Voshka reached inside the bag and pulled out a device with various straps and arms and a decidedly phallic-looking appendage.

Staring blankly at it for a moment, Azka smiled. "I love it. Is it art?"

At this, Commander Khosi threw back his head and laughed. "Yes. It most certainly is: *functional* art. I take it you've never seen one of these before?"

"No."

"It's a robotic plug. A Platinum X700, top of the line, from Alpha Zen."

"Oh." Azka continued to stare at the device, comprehension slowly dawning. "*Oh!*"

"Yes. You *do* know what a plug is, I take it?"

Azka nodded. "Of course, Master. But I've never seen one...like that."

"My understanding is, since you're an A-class pet, that you're sexually experienced, though you've never been penetrated yourself. Is that assumption correct?"

"Yes, Master."

“Then, this will help prepare you for...well, for *me*, to be blunt. It will open you gradually over the next few hours. That will be much better for you. So. Why don’t you take your wrap off, and lie facedown on the bed, and we’ll get started.”

“If it pleases you, Master.” Azka removed his wrap with a flick of his wrist, revealing his completely erect organ.

“On second thought,” Voshka replied, tossing the device onto the bed when he got an eyeful of the poor pet’s state, “I think we need to take care of you first.”

“Oh, thank you, Master!”

“Would you like to perform for me again? Or shall I pleasure you?”

“Um,” Azka stammered, his cheeks flushing hot. “Whatever...*you* want, Master.”

“You don’t need to be so formal. Forget whatever they taught you at the Academy—just tell me straight out what you want, no need to call me Master every five seconds.”

“I want you to...pleasure me.”

Voshka smiled. “Ah. That would have been my choice as well.”

With that, the Commander dropped to his knees before his new pet, gently spreading his thighs open with his hands.

Azka gasped, shivering from his touch.

Sliding his hand around the boy’s shaft, Voshka proceeded to explore him with his tongue, kissing him and sucking gently on the tip.

“Ohhhh,” Azka moaned. “Master, I am sorry! I am sorry, but—*uhhhnnnn!*”

With that, the young pet ejaculated, his hot seed shooting down the Commander’s throat.

Voshka looked up, smiling as he swallowed the boy’s salty gift.

“I’m sorry,” Azka repeated, mortified that he had been unable to control himself.

“Nothing to apologize about. You’re very sweet.”

“I was...so aroused. I’ve never felt like that before.”

“That would be because of the cider—the punch was accidentally spiked with Tarnacsian cider. Do you know what that is?”

Azka nodded, surprised. Every Academy-bred pet knew about the

cider, though he had never imagined he would have the opportunity to try it. Tarnacsia was contraband on Amoi, though it was continuously sought after on the Black Market by eunuchs and aphrodisiac connoisseurs.

“Did you drink any of it?”

“A few cups,” Azka remembered.

“You’re going to feel it for the next few hours, certainly. We’ll have plenty of time to take things...more slowly. So,” now Voshka rose to his feet, retrieving the device, “lie back on the bed, on your stomach.”

Azka obeyed, and the Commander proceeded to strap the device onto him so that it was positioned firmly at the critical place. He adjusted the soft-tipped arms so that they pushed the flesh of his gluteus muscles apart for better access to the boy’s portal. Then, he pressed the plug-head appendage up against the tiny opening, and turned the device on.

“It’s self-lubricating,” he explained, as the plug began slowly vibrating against Azka’s entrance. “It will gradually penetrate you over the next few hours, so just try to relax.”

“Yes, Master.” The pet closed his eyes, enjoying the stimulation of the device and feeling rather sleepy after his release.

“I’ll be back when you’re ready for me,” the Commander promised, before leaving the room.

As Voshka made his way toward the great hall, Aki and Suuki suddenly came running toward him.

Both boys were almost completely naked; Aki wore his cape, helmet, and boots over his bare flesh, squirt-gun in hand, while Suuki sported a makeshift helmet of a saucepan on his head, a recently borrowed Blondie’s cape trailing behind him on the floor.

The boys skidded to a halt upon apprehending the Commander, looking up at him in awe.

“Well now. What do we have here?” Voshka asked, trying hard to keep from laughing.

“Are you the Commander?” Aki asked, eyes wide.

“If you mean Commander Khosi, then, yes.” Now Voshka crouched down, grinning at the boys. “And one of you must be Aki?”

“Me! And this is Suuki. He’s my best friend. We just met today.”

Suuki nodded, too overwhelmed by Voshka's presence to speak.

"I see. And, might I inquire into your most interesting choice of apparel? Or should I say...lack of apparel?"

"We like being naked!" Aki announced, inexplicably pointing up to the ceiling as though the inspiration for nakedness resided there.

"It was Aki's idea," Suuki clarified.

"And I must say, I heartily approve. All Commanders should enjoy being naked at times, in my view. I understand you have military aspirations, Aki?"

The boy blinked for a moment, puzzling over the word *aspirations*. "Yes, I want to be a Commander, just like you!"

"Me too," Suuki asserted.

"I'm flattered. Then, it would only be fitting for me to invite both of you to complete your apprenticeships with me, when it comes time during your military training."

Aki and Suuki looked at each other in disbelief.

"You mean go to Alpha Zen?"

"Yes. When the time is right—I suppose that would be in about... seven years? Would you be interested?"

"Yes!" both boys yelled, excited.

"On *one* condition," Voshka added, his eyes twinkling. "You must promise to dress like this on a regular basis while at my palace."

The young would-be Commanders both giggled.

"We will," Aki promised.

"Excellent." Voshka rose to his feet. "Now. If you'll excuse me, I have of a matter of some urgency to attend to. Run along now, and do whatever it is you were doing."



"HEY. WHERE THE HELL IS TAI? He said he would bring us some food," Askel complained.

Freyn shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm thirsty, too."

"Why don't you go in there and get us something?"

"You go in there. I'm too tired to stand up."

Askel paused, listening. "What the hell are they doing in there?"

"Do I look like a psychic?"

"I don't know *what* you look like."

"Well, I can't magically project into other rooms and see what's going on. Go get us some refreshments, and then you can have a look around."

Askel contemplated this, looking disinclined to move. "What if we *could* magically project into other rooms?"

"Then I'd magically project you *out* of this one."

"Aren't you at all curious about what's going on in there?"

"What I want to know is, where the fuck is Odi?"

"Call him."

"He said if we called him again, he'd shove the phone up our asses."

"Well," Askel replied, after a moment, "he can't shove it up *both* our asses, at least not at the same time."

"You call him then."

"That is...unless...we'd have to be like, back to back—"

"Do you have to say every random thing that comes into your head?" Freyn demanded.

"At least I *have* random things in my head, unlike *some* people."

"You say that like randomness is an attribute."

"I mean *your* head is *empty*," Askel retorted.

"Oh? I thought you weren't psychic. How do you know what's in my head?"

"It doesn't take a psychic to know you're an idiot."

"*I'm* an idiot?" Freyn laughed. "And which one of us was it who tried to write a letter with a pen stuck up his ass?"

Askel blushed. "I didn't know it would get stuck up in there. *You* made me sit on it!"

"But who puts a pen up his ass? Only an idiot."

"You mean that wasn't a pen you fucked me with that one time?"

"Shithead," Freyn grumbled.

Askel laughed. "Pen-dick!"

"We already established that I'm bigger than *you*."

"Oh? I seem to recall that was never resolved to my satisfaction."

"That's only because no one wants to look at your penis to decide," Freyn retorted.

"You just said we established it," Askel argued.

"We established it because it's evidentially true."

"Evidentially? Is that even a word?"

"I mean it's *a priori* knowledge," Freyn clarified.

"What the fuck is *a priori* knowledge?"

"Something that...just is. It's true from the very beginning."

"The beginning of what?" Askel demanded, laughing.

"Of...creation."

Askel flipped open his communicator and brought up the dictionary option. "Evidentially. Nope. Not in there."

"You spelled it wrong."

"I didn't spell it, I *said* it, retard. It's voice-activated, remember?"

"Give me that," Freyn demanded, grabbing for the handheld device. The brothers struggled over it for a few minutes until the communicator finally went flying across the room.

"Idiot! You just broke it!"

"It's not broken. Those things are impossible to break," Freyn countered.

Askel got up and retrieved it, punching a few buttons. "You *did* break it, moron!"

Freyn sighed, exasperated. "Give it here," he said, snapping his fingers.

"No! You'll just break it even more."

"How can something be *more broken*? It's broken or it's not."

"That's not true," Askel protested. "There are...degrees of brokenness."

"Well, you can't use it no matter how broken it is, so let me have a look."

Askel sighed, tossing the unit to him. Freyn reached out to catch it but the unit hit his knee, falling to the ground.

"See! Now it's even more broken."

Freyn scowled, refusing to encourage the conversation with a reply.

After some moments of silence, Askel continued. "Anyway, we

wouldn't have to magically project into rooms to see what's going on. We could just activate the cameras and tape everything."

Freyn sat back in his chair, sighing with disgust. "See? That's what I'm talking about. Randomness. You don't know how to carry on a normal conversation."

"And you do? Don't you have to be like, *normal*, to carry on a normal conversation?"

"Define normal," Freyn grumbled.

"Normal is—"

"Are you going in there or what?"

Askel sighed, rising. "All right. You'd better have that fixed by the time I get back."

Freyn answered this by flipping him off.

Askel started inside and then turned back. "Normal is like, the *opposite* of you. Like, *a priori* since the beginning of creation, there was you and then there was *normal*. Which is everything else. And since you are so *not* normal, you sort of balance out the universe. It's like—"

"Askel!"

Askel laughed, and then turned and entered the penthouse a little tentatively. He knew that, technically, he wasn't supposed to leave his post, but they had been sitting outside for hours, and he was dying of thirst.

He looked around, noting an upended small table on the floor and some broken punch cups. The great hall was deserted, though he could hear loud bumps and scuffling sounds and—was he imagining it?—the distinctive sounds of *sex*, coming from various parts the penthouse.

Shaking his head, he spied the refreshment table and gravitated to it.

"Oh, punch!" he exclaimed, delighted. He peered into the bowl, frowning when he realized most of it was gone—the bowl was only about one-third full, tiny fragments of ice floating along its frothy amber surface. Deciding that he and Freyn were entitled to it, he picked up the bowl and carried the entire thing back outside.

Freyn snorted. "Pig! I didn't say bring the whole thing!"

"This is all that's left. There wasn't any food."

"What about cups?"

"They were all broken."

"We'll use the ladle, I guess." Freyn scooped out some of the punch and took a drink.

"Don't drink *all* of it!"

"What? I just took a sip!"

"Let me have some."

Freyn handed him the ladle. "So...what are they doing in there?"

Askel shrugged. "There was no one in the great hall. And there was, like, all this stuff knocked over. It sounded like people were, I don't know, doing *sexual* things."

Snorting, Freyn grabbed the ladle from him and took another drink. "In your dreams, pervert."

"I'm just saying that's what it sounded like."

"Hmmm."

"Did you fix my thing?"

"Askel, no one can fix your thing. It's beyond help."

"I mean the communicator!"

Freyn laughed. "Yeah, I fixed it. Told you I would."

At that moment, the elevator to the penthouse floor opened and Odi stepped out.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Freyn demanded.

Odi shook his head, sighing, and then approached them and sat down on the bench that lined the wall.

"Want some punch?" Askel offered, holding out the ladle.

"Sure." Odi took a sip, and then drained the ladle.

Freyn studied him. "Did you even sleep?"

"No. It was just one thing after the other."

"So, what happened with the break-in?" Askel asked.

"That was bizarre. We think it's related to an unauthorized entry on the main level security. There was, I guess, a Blondie that gained access to the building and then broke into Sir Megala's suite. I mean, he triggered the automatic security clearance, you know, based on his Blondie genetic code. But then—here's the weird part—the logs couldn't identify him. He came up as '*No Match*' to the existing

database.”

“That’s impossible,” Freyn replied. “All the Blondies are in the database. That comes directly from Jupiter.”

“I know. That’s what we can’t figure out. But we discovered his same signature in Megala’s entry logs, except in that case, he fiddled with the panel to gain access.”

“Fuck,” Askel exclaimed. “I didn’t know anyone could do that.”

Odi shook his head. “Neither did I.”

“Well, he can’t be a Blondie, if he’s not in the database,” Freyn pointed out.

“Then how did he gain access via Blondie authorization?”

“Maybe some device we’re not aware of?”

“No. The scanner detects genetic code. Actually, Blondie authorization only scans for the Blondie signature and the identification program only kicks in afterwards for logging purposes.”

“So he has a Blondie genetic signature and gained access, but then the identification program failed?”

“Yep.”

Askel shook his head. “That’s fucked up.”

“Wait until Jupiter finds out,” Freyn remarked.

“Why wouldn’t Jupiter know already?”

“Did you even read the Eos Tower Security Manual, Askel?” Freyn demanded.

Askel blushed. “I read...part of it.”

“Logs are only uploaded into her mainframe once a week. It keeps traffic orderly, since logs are low priority and don’t really need to be uploaded continuously,” Odi explained. “We have until the day after tomorrow to figure this out before Jupiter knows there’s a problem.”

Freyn sat back in his chair, puzzling over this news. “So, he’s a Blondie, but not a Blondie that we know of. Therefore, he’s not a Blondie.”

“He’s a Blondie, but he’s not,” Odi agreed.

“What did he take from Megala’s suite?”

“That’s the other strange thing. Megala claims he broke into his safe but he only took one thing: the blueprints to this building.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Askel wondered aloud. “You can get

those off any public terminal.”

“Not *these* blueprints. Remember, Megala designed the Tower. From what I understand, there are rooms and secret passages that no one even knows about—not even Jupiter,” Odi explained.

“Is that what he told you?”

The bodyguard shook his head. “No, but that’s the rumor, anyway. He seemed pretty distressed, but he wouldn’t tell me why.”

“We should *make* him tell us,” Freyn said, frowning.

“He’s probably tripping because he’s afraid Jupiter will access the plans and discover he incorporated all this unauthorized stuff into the design and then hid it from her,” Odi speculated.

Askel nodded. “He probably crapped his pants.”

“Well,” Odi continued, drinking another ladleful of punch, “at least I was productive on *one* count.” He held up a palm-sized device, wiggling it.

Freyn opened his eyes, surprised. “A residual scanner! Where did you get it?”

“Actually, I went over to the convention center and tracked one down there.”

“Are you going to scan the penthouse now?”

“Yeah, after I grab a smoke. Iason’s been on me about it.”

“You need some sleep,” Freyn suggested. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” Odi replied wryly. “So, I’m going inside now.”

“Thanks for drinking all the punch,” Askel teased, peering at the empty punch bowl.

“Sorry. I was thirsty.”

“Hey! Is there such a word as ‘evidentiarally’?”

“Fuck if I know,” Odi shrugged, ignoring the brothers as they launched into another argument. He went inside, looking around and frowning when he saw the disarray of the great hall.

“Where is everyone?” he muttered aloud. He then headed down the guest wing toward the garden. As he passed by various doors, he could hear the unmistakable sounds of copulation emanating from within the rooms.

He shook his head. He wasn’t even that surprised—probably some illicit party game Iason had devised.

Once he reached the garden, he relaxed, leaning back on the bench before the pond. Someone had already retracted the greenhouse awning and he shivered a bit in the cold. Though it had stopped snowing, it was most definitely still winter.

After enjoying a nice long smoke, he flipped on the residual scanner, curious to see if anything would be detected. He was surprised when the alarm light immediately began flashing red—indicating very high levels of residuals.

Daryl had been right.

Tossing his cigarette butt over the balcony ledge, Odi made his way toward the pool, studying the screen to determine where the highest, and most recent, residuals were located.

He stopped in front of the pool, puzzled. According to the scanner, the pool was surrounded by off-the-chart levels of residual imprints, of *recent* origin. It almost looked as if...a ring encircled the pool.

A ring....

Odi suddenly thought of a pet ring, and then his thoughts wandered, from there, to a cock ring. Next he began thinking about Tai...in his bed...and a tight, light pink ring that he *very* much wanted to explore.

He looked down, verifying that he had just sprung a massive erection.

Bewildered, he wondered if the scanner was somehow emitting G-waves. *Something* was stimulating him—and fast.

His heart started to pound. Without even thinking about it, he found himself heading toward the kitchen. He slipped the scanner in his pocket, for the moment too distracted by his arousal to consider the implications of his discovery.

All he could think of was his need, and his mounting desire.

For Tai.



“BUT...I FEEL REALLY *REALLY* HORNY,” Daryl whimpered.

“I told you. You’re never using that thing again. I should have thrown it out,” Katze replied.

They were lying together on the bed. Though he had mostly recovered from the eunuch's punishment, Daryl was now pouting.

"But I *need* something."

Katze rolled over on his side, looking down at him. "You know what your problem is? You think too much about sex."

"How is that a problem?"

"You know what I mean. You've forgotten what it's all about. It's not just about orgasms, you know. It's about intimacy. We can still have that. And, if you want to know the truth, I'm a little hurt when you act like that's not enough."

Daryl quieted, considering his remarks. "I didn't mean it like that. You know that. It's just that, it wasn't until recently that I even *had* a lover."

"Right. And what does a lover do? He *loves*." Katze leaned forward, kissing Daryl's nose. "I can still love you, whether or not we get off."

Daryl smiled. "That's true. And I love, you, too. But...I'm still horny."

"I know," Katze sighed. "I am, too. I think Riki was right. He said something was in the punch." He shifted positions, sliding his leg over Daryl's body, between his legs.

"Kiss me."

Katze eagerly obeyed this mandate, bending down to explore his lover's mouth in a long, slow kiss. He broke off, shivering.

"That was hot!" Daryl exclaimed. "Kiss me again."

Katze needed no further persuasion; he felt as though he could kiss Daryl forever. It was a kiss of such incredible sweetness that he felt he might burst from it, simply tear open, his love for Daryl spilling out everywhere, impossible to contain.

"Daryl," he whispered. "I want us to be together...always. I feel as though, I can't really put it into words, but, I *need* you. I need you to live. You're like the air I breathe now."

"I feel that way, too," Daryl replied, waiting for what he felt was a long enough pause before adding, "will you finger-fuck me now?"

At this, Katze laughed loudly. "You little pervert. I'm trying to be all serious and romantic here."

"I know. But...I'm really *really* horny. Will you, please?"

"You *do* realize you're not going to be able to come, don't you? Why don't we just hold each other for awhile?"

"I suppose." Daryl's expression betrayed his reluctance on this point. "You said you would ask Iason about restoration."

"I will, when the moment is right. But," now Katze frowned, reaching down to stroke the side of his lover's face, "you're missing my point. What if he says no? What then?"

"I thought you wanted to be restored."

"I do. Of course, that would be heaven. You're not understanding me. I'm trying to tell you that I don't *need* to be restored. The only thing I need is *you*."

Daryl's eyes watered, his lip trembling. "Now you're trying to make me feel bad for wanting it."

"Daryl," the eunuch sighed, pulling him close. "That's not what I'm trying to do, at all. Forget it. Look, I'll talk to Iason like I said I would. But I can't promise anything. That's all I'm saying: no promises. And what I was *trying* to tell you is that even if we can never *climax* again, we can still be lovers. We can still love."

"I know." Daryl closed his eyes, relaxing into the man's strong arms. "I don't know what's wrong with me. You're right. Of course you're right."

"All that matters is that I have you."

Daryl smiled, snuggling closer. "Yes. You do have me."



"IF I COME AGAIN, MY COCK IS going to fall off," Riki announced unceremoniously. "You're crushing me, by the way."

Lord Mink sighed, opening his eyes. Then he closed them again as he nuzzled against Riki's cheek. It felt so perfect, lying on top of the mongrel's warm body, his organ still gripped—though more loosely now—by his pet's inner embrace.

"Still crushing me," Riki remarked, after a moment.

Iason rolled off him and then sat up, looking down at him. "Riki?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to buy you a special present. Anything you'd like."

Riki snorted at this. "*Anything?* How about my own hovercraft?" he teased.

"If that's what you'd like."

The mongrel sat bolt upright. "Seriously? Fuck! You mean...*any* model I want?"

Iason smiled at his enthusiasm. "Any vehicle."

"And I can actually drive it...I mean, go out and stuff?"

"Yes, my love."

"Fuck, yes!" Excited, Riki bounced on the bed like a little boy. "I already know which one!"

"Which one, pet?"

"A Zerovian!"

Lord Mink laughed. "Of course: the most expensive car on Amoi."

"You said *any* one!"

"And you shall have it, my love." The Blondie reached down and kissed him on the forehead.

"When can we get it? Tomorrow?"

"If you like."

"Yes! I would most *definitely* like!" Riki leaned back on his elbows, grinning. "Why are you being so nice?"

"Because you're my pet and I want you to be happy with me. I want you to enjoy your life here. If you want something, all you have to do is ask, Riki, and if it's within my power—and within reason—I'll give it to you."

The mongrel couldn't help but think of the one thing that Iason would never give him, no matter how many times he asked for it: his freedom. But he knew better than to bring that up and spoil the moment.

"Perhaps if I loosened your chain a bit, you would be happier."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose it would do no harm to allow you some time each day at the Saloon."

"The Saloon?" Riki brightened; he'd never heard of the Saloon, but the name sounded promising. "What is it?"

"It's a tavern for pets, down on the main level. Perhaps it's time

you started socializing a bit more.”

“Hell, yeah! They have drinks there, right?”

“Yes.”

“How many drinks can I have?”

“I will not give you a limit, provided you do not arrive home in a completely inebriated state. The first time that happens, I will severely curtail your privileges and set a drink limit. Understood?”

“Yeah, I get it. So that’s where the other pets go, the ones who live in the Tower?”

“Yes. And—as of today I’m returning your smokes to you, as I said I would.”

“Awesome! Thanks, Iason!”

The Blondie answered with a slight incline of his head. “I expect you to show some restraint with those cigarettes,” he warned. “I told you I want you to cut back on your regimen.”

“I will,” the mongrel promised.

“You had better.”

“Iason?”

“Yes?”

“I do have feelings for you, you know. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have gotten so upset when you paired with the Commander,” Riki murmured.

Lord Mink nodded, looking away for a moment as if considering something.

“Riki, there’s something I want to tell you about Voshka Khosi.”

“Yeah?” The mongrel swallowed hard, his heart starting to beat a little faster. Somehow he knew what was coming: it was something that he had privately guessed at, that he had mulled over, many times, in his thoughts.

“Do you remember when we first met? You offered to give your body to me rather than be in my debt.”

Riki nodded. How could he possibly forget that? That was how he came to be Iason’s pet, although, at the time, he had only meant to give him a single night of pleasure. The Blondie, of course, had wanted more, taking far more than the mongrel could ever have imagined he would claim.

"I have a similar situation with Voshka. I'm...indebted to him."

"How so?"

"I mentioned his brother, Anori, I think? What I told you about the crash wasn't true." Lord Mink paused for a moment, staring down at the bed. Then, he looked at Riki. "He died...at my hand."

For a long moment the mongrel made no reply, returning his gaze steadily. "I thought so," he said, finally.

Now Iason was surprised.

"I knew there was something going on. So...you paid off your debt with your body?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Does he know?"

"No. And you must never tell anyone."

"I won't."

Riki wanted to ask why he had done it, but he decided to let Iason tell him in his own time. "Do you remember what you told me when I offered my body to you that day?" He changed his expression, a look of disdain shifting his features. "How very mongrel-like," he whispered, in perfect imitation of the Blondie's insulting reply. "Guess that means you and I aren't so different, after all."

"No," Lord Mink conceded. "Perhaps not."

"And now we both have blood on our hands. So we're on the same page there, too."

"Hmmm."

"Iason?"

"Yes, love?"

"Why did you tell me? Now, I mean."

The Blondie reached down and kissed him softly on the lips. "Because I wanted to. Now we should dress and get back to the party."

"I don't know," the mongrel replied, grinning. "It seems like the party was in *here*." He reached for his clothes, suddenly feeling happy, for the first time in a long, long while. He was thrilled that Iason had opened up to him and equally excited about the promise of a new hovercraft. He even had his cigarette privileges back, with assurances that he could visit the Saloon.

Perhaps it wasn't so bad being Iason's pet, after all.

Riki knew that any other pet would say he had it made. He had won the heart of the Blondie whose love he had come to treasure, more than he would even admit to himself. So, he would hold these things in the shelter of his own heart, finding comfort in them, even in the face of a life without freedom.

He could wear his chains now because he had come to realize that they meant nothing: his soul was already fettered to his Blondie Master, whether or not his wrists carried the gold-plated initials. And he knew, deep inside, that he would never really be free now, even if Iason let him go back to Ceres.

And that was something he knew the Blondie would never do.



YOUSI GAZED UP AT HEIKU IN SURPRISE. He opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again. The look in the Blondie's eyes was unmistakable. And suddenly...undeniably familiar.

Heiku smiled at his reaction. "Do you know what I have in mind, Yousi?"

His brow furrowing, Yousi seemed deep in thought for a moment. "Heiku," he answered finally, "were we...I mean to say, you and I, that is, mmmm...were we, at *one* time, *lovers*?"

Heiku had leaned closer to hear what Yousi tried to say, for the Blondie had begun to stammer and mumble as he often did, and he was quite accustomed to having to do so just to make out what Yousi was trying to say. But this time, just as Yousi said the word "*lovers*," he looked into his eyes with a sudden flicker of comprehension, his remembrance lighting up his features with an intelligence Lord Quiahtenon had not seen since before his modification.

"Yousi," he whispered, overcome with emotion. He gathered him up in his arms and pulled him close, kissing him in the way he had wanted to for so long, with a passion that betrayed his years of waiting and longing.

He felt as though he couldn't get enough, for as soon as he had Yousi in his arms again, it was clear that his old lover was responding to him, just as he once had. Thrilled, he moved his hands up and

down the Blondie's body, almost too excited to know where to begin.

"Yes, we were," he answered, finally, forcing himself to break away, and then—spying a vulnerable expanse of throat, immediately assaulted it with tiny bites and kisses that made Yousi shudder.

"Heiku! That...that...."

"Your body remembers," Heiku interrupted, nuzzling against his cheek. "Isn't that right?"

"I—I...don't know. Ohh!"

"Don't try to fight it," he soothed. "Just let go." With that, he unfastened Yousi's tunic and slipped his hand inside, pushing back the fabric to touch his warm skin. Forcing himself to pause and slow down, Heiku then began to gently twist and flick the Blondie's nipples, stimulating them in just the way he knew Yousi couldn't resist.

"Ummm...." Yousi was beside himself with lust, but he felt confused and overwhelmed. "Ohh!"

"It's all right, my darling. You love this. Remember?"

"Help," Yousi whimpered. "Help me."

Heiku pulled back, frowning. "I'm sorry. Do you want to stop?"

"There is going to be a stain on my paints," Yousi explained, "if you don't."

At this, Lord Quiahtenon couldn't help but laugh. "Is that all you're worried about?"

Yousi peered down at the impressive bulge in his trousers. "Also, my penis is...*moving*. It doesn't usually do that. So much, I mean."

"Hmmm." Heiku ran his bionic hand slowly down Yousi's stomach, eliciting an involuntary gasp from his sensitive lover. He worked the fastening open with admirable ease—a mere flick of his finger. Besides having the deftness of a surgeon, he had the advantage of state-of-the-art technology hardwired into his own anatomy. He allowed the remarkable, fully sensitive phalanges to gently explore the length of Yousi's shaft, noting how tightly his skin was pulled over the jerking organ.

Yousi cried out, grabbing onto his arms as though he were about to fall.

"I've never seen you quite this aroused," Heiku remarked, forced

to make an adjustment to his own fully matured erection, which was positioned uncomfortably in the tight confines of his form-fitting pants. He was trying to be patient; what he really wanted was to throw Yousi to the floor and ride him with unbridled enthusiasm, but he knew his old lover wasn't ready for that...yet.

"Let's see. I do believe you preferred setting number 4, isn't that right?" With a knowing smile, Heiku activated the self-lubricating vibration function of his prosthesis, closing his fingers around Yousi's considerable girth with enviable precision. He stimulated him with the perfect degree of pressure and began pumping him expertly, his sensors responding to Yousi's blood flow and skin changes and adjusting pressure and cadence accordingly so that the Blondie was brought to arousal in the most pleasurable manner possible.

"That feels *good*," Yousi proclaimed, rather loudly. Then he began to gasp erratically, pushing against Heiku's chest as though trying to push him away. "Ohh!! Watch out! Your hand will get wet!"

"My hand is already wet," Heiku smiled.

"It's going to, now!"

The Blondie couldn't resist teasing him, just a bit. "It's going to... *what*?"

"You know what it does! It's going to do it! Ohhh!"

"Don't tell me you're going to ejaculate!" Heiku replied with mock sternness. "Surely you can hold it in."

Yousi, mistaking his teasing for a serious concern, closed his eyes tightly so he wouldn't have to face the Blondie's reproach when he liberated his anxious seed, something which now seemed impossible to stop.

It was going to happen.

With a loud, unrestrained groan—every muscle in his body straining and tensing as he approached his peak—he climaxed, his seed spraying up in explosive arcs onto his own stomach and dripping down Heiku's fingers in a mesmerizing fountain of unfettered sexuality.

The poor Blondie was almost afraid to open his eyes, for fear that Heiku would reprimand him.

"I'm guessing that was as good as it looked," Heiku whispered,

finally, releasing his hold on Yousi's retreating organ.

Yousi opened one eye, warily.

"I've missed that sound." Lord Quiahtenon gazed down at him, his features now tight with urgency. "Oh, Yousi. I need you, so desperately. Please, let me take you?"

Surprised that Heiku wasn't angry with him, the Blondie relaxed, and then nodded.

The slight motion was all Heiku needed. Almost frantically, he kissed Yousi again, pushing him back and up against the wall as his hands began groping his body. He felt his throat grow tight, his reticent emotion suddenly separating and lifting from a place deep within, from a vast inner wasteland where it had drifted, escaping the vexing acuity of his heart.

He broke away, tried to speak, and then found he could not; instead, he kissed Yousi again, and then, with almost savage insistence, flipped the Blondie around so that he faced the wall. He pinned him there, pressing his own body up against him as he tugged down Yousi's trousers with an authority that the Blondie now remembered. Then, he worked the fastening on his own bodysuit to release his cock, which jutted forward eagerly, heavy with his lust.

"Oh, my." The pure sensual delight of his ready organ up against Yousi's bared flesh made Heiku moan with anticipation; he closed his eyes, trying to rein in his desire, but the effect of the cider was making his head spin, so urgent was his need.

"I remember this," Yousi observed happily.

"This feels so right. You're so...*warm*. I love the way you smell, your hair—even just your skin. Everything. It's just...*you*. I've missed you so much, I can't tell you how much I've missed you, Yousi. There hasn't been a day that's gone by...."

"Use your finger first. That twirly one," Yousi suggested, pleased with himself to have recalled that important detail.

Heiku needed no second invitation, immediately inserting his middle finger into the Blondie's proffered ass, rotating and lubricating as he gently kissed Yousi's shoulder.

"I missed you dreadfully, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. That's why I didn't come to you. I knew you wouldn't

remember. It would only frighten you.”

Yousi thought about this, recollecting the Blondie's kindness whenever he came into the Bondage Shop. “I wasn't that afraid of you. Not like some of the others.”

“I wasn't going to force myself on you. And...forgive me for saying this, but—you were so very different afterwards. You weren't *you*, not the Yousi I knew, from before. I had to get to know you all over again, the *new* you. It's taken me a long time to adjust to that. And...do you know something? Until Ima, I hadn't even bought a single pet. I just wanted to be alone and think of you, and somehow, when I fantasized, it was almost as if we were still together.”

“You bought lots of oils,” Lord Xuuju remembered.

“I've waited for this, I've dreamed about this, for so long.” Heiku kissed his shoulder again. “Your body *does* remember me. I'll tell you something else. At first, it was hard for me, but now, I can honestly say, I have just as much affection for you now as I did before you were modified, though, admittedly, in a different way. But I still desire you sexually in the same way.”

He withdrew his finger from Yousi's gripping sanctum, and then positioned himself at his gates, arching his groin forward slightly. Then, his hands over Yousi's, fingers intertwined as he kept him pinned firmly up against the wall, he penetrated.

Lord Quiahtenon groaned, his lips parting as he inched inside the Blondie. He was so stimulated that his entire body was shaking; he wanted to relish the moment but felt as though he would pass out from need.

Slowly, gently, he began to thrust, hardly daring to believe that he was finally inside his old lover again. Yousi felt perfect; he resisted his every move with intoxicating, unrelenting constriction. Then, the Blondie's sex muscles began to spasm and contract purposefully against him, pumping him with fatal resolve.

It was too much. Overcome with desire and passion, Heiku began thrusting at will, throwing his whole body into an acquisition that encroached upon more barbaric sensibilities, transporting him to a place of complete domination and power...

...and utter sensual pleasure.

“Magnificent! Oh, Yousi! You undo me!”

Your ass is gripping me like a hot vice, Lord Quiahtenon thought. *And now that I have you again, I shall fuck you night and day*. With that, the great Blondie felt his essence rise up from deep within, tugging and climbing, and then, with a low growl that began in the back of his throat, he brought forth his sex cry, shooting his seed into deep, forbidden spaces.

Shuddering, he struggled to return to his senses from what had decidedly been the best orgasm he could *ever* remember having.

“My ass hurts,” Yousi announced, though he had not complained while Heiku was taking him.

Laughing, Heiku released him, turning him around. “I imagine so. I wish I could say I was sorry. But, I’m afraid I’m not. I absolutely loved that. And I love *you*, my funny little Ju-ju.”

Yousi blinked at this, not sure if he was supposed to say something in reply. He started to speak and then frowned, shaking his head. “Do I love you now, I guess?”

Leaning forward, Heiku silenced him with a kiss. “Don’t try to figure it out today. I’m not expecting you to feel the same as you once did. It’s not important.” He swallowed, knowing this was a lie, but wanting to reassure Yousi, who suddenly looked rather anxious. He knew that when things got to be too much, or too confusing, Yousi would shut down or become even more frazzled.

This time, however, the bright-eyed Blondie only seemed a bit bewildered, but not overly so. “I don’t have to figure it out today,” he nodded, relieved. Then, after a pause, he added, “But I wouldn’t mind if we attempted that again, sometime. I like your fingers, and how you touched different places. I also enjoyed it when you put your tongue in my mouth. I especially liked that, when you moved it. That was quite extraordinary.”

Heiku studied him for a moment. Was he just imagining it, or was Yousi’s intellect showing some improvement? Perhaps it was not just his memory that was returning, but his old mind, as well—an exciting, though admittedly unlikely possibility.

He smiled. How ironic that Yousi should show signs of getting his mind back, after Heiku had just fucked him senseless.



VOSHKA SLOWED HIS PACE AS HE APPROACHED the bedroom off the great hall where Omaki and Enyu had been enjoying unbridled sex in full view of anyone caring to look. At the moment they appeared spent, both of them lying on Iason's bed in a state of complete relaxation.

Enyu, physically confused by the premature solicitation of his interval, had fallen asleep, and lay curled up against Lord Ghan's body, one leg thrown possessively over his Master's torso.

Omaki, though nearly asleep himself, was nevertheless becoming aware of a new surge of carnal impulses and had been considering ravishing his pet once again, despite Enyu's obvious exhaustion.

But at that moment, the Commander approached the room and stopped, leaning against the doorframe with deliberate nonchalance.

"Well now. What do we have here?"

Raising his head, Lord Ghan took in Voshka's considerable size, immediately recognizing by his dress and manner that the man had to be Commander Khosi.

"Ah. You must be the famous Commander," he greeted, a devious smile curling his lips as he apprehended—much to his delight—the Alphazanian's striking good looks.

"And *you* must be, I presume, the notorious Omaki Ghan, proprietor of the Taming Tower?" Voshka returned his smile, equally impressed with Omaki's appearance, and having a much more complete view of what the Blondie had to offer.

"How did you guess?"

"I recognized you from the cover of *Midas Underground*. Iason left a copy of the magazine in my room, and I read your interview. Quite intriguing, I must say."

"I imagine you may be a bit...confused by what's going on here," Lord Ghan laughed.

Voshka smiled. "Not at all. It seems some Tarnacsian cider was inadvertently placed on the menu. I'm quite familiar with its effects."

"Then, I hope you'll excuse me if I seem unusually happy to see you," Omaki replied, as he began encouraging another erection in full

view of the watching Commander.

Voshka, who knew his own G-wave implant was exacerbating the Blondie's physical response, only smiled, reaching down to adjust his own swelling organ, which strained, once again, against the confines of his garment. He had just helped himself to a cup of punch that had been abandoned in the great hall and was already starting to feel its effects.

"Perhaps you would care to join me?" Omaki offered, his sharp eyes easily discerning the Commander's interest.

"You're most hospitable," Voshka answered, removing his broach clip with a flick of his wrist and letting his cape drop to the floor. He began to undress as the Blondie looked on with obvious appreciation.

"Would you mind shutting the door—just hit that button on the panel behind you?" Omaki asked. "I wouldn't want Aki to see us together; he's quite a fan of yours, and he might find this confusing."

"Ah, yes. Aki. Do you mean the delightful boy who is running about the house naked?"

At this, Lord Ghan frowned. "Is he *still* naked?"

"Not completely. I seem to recall he was wearing a cape and his helmet...and perhaps his boots."

The Blondie sat up, concerned. "Perhaps I ought to see to him."

"I wouldn't worry," Voshka replied, shutting the door and quickly stripping off the rest of his clothing. "He and the other little one are far too fast for anyone to catch. Besides, everyone seems to have already paired up—the penthouse looks deserted."

"Hmmm." Lord Ghan lay back down, his attention now consumed by the Commander's nakedness, his eyes gleaming with appreciation for Voshka's impressive physique. "My, my. Aren't you the handsome one?"

"I was about to say the same about *you*," the Commander replied with a wink. He motioned to Enyu. "And who might this enchanting creature be?"

"This is my pet, Enyu. He's from Xeron. But at the moment I fear I've worn him out: he came into his interval early, it seems."

"A Xeronian? Mmmm. I've always wanted to try one of those." Voshka approached the bed, fondling himself openly as he regarded

the Blondie sprawled before him. "But since he's asleep...."

The Commander joined Omaki on the bed, moving onto his side and reaching out to run a tantalizing finger down the Blondie's torso.

Lord Ghan grinned, enjoying Voshka's touch and his warmth. "You smell nice."

"As do you."

"I'm sure I smell of sweat," Omaki protested, laughing.

"You smell of sex," the Commander corrected, skimming his hand across the Blondie's stomach. He bent down and took Omaki's nipple in his mouth, working the bud between his teeth.

Lord Ghan gasped at this, thrilled. "That feels divine."

Enyu stirred, his eyes fluttering open. He then regarded the Commander with wide, interested eyes.

"Master, who is this?"

Voshka lifted his head, appraising the Xeronian with equal interest. "Ah. You're awake."

"This is Commander Khosi," Omaki explained, feeling suddenly quite comfortable between his pet and his new friend. "Be a good pet and do whatever he says."

Any other time, Enyu might have felt jealous of someone sharing his Master's bed. But at the moment, he only felt a surge of lust, immediately warming up to the idea of a threesome.

"What shall I do, Commander Khosi?" Enyu asked, rather formally.

Voshka reached out and took hold of his chin, studying his face and, in particular, his strange eyes, with the slit pupils so like a feline's eyes. "Fascinating."

Enyu's eyes dilated, eliciting a smile from the Commander. "You're an interesting creature. Why don't you just relax for the moment; I'll tell you when I'm ready for you."

The Xeronian nodded, feeling enormously attracted to the handsome Alphazanian, though, of course, he still preferred his own Master.

"You might move your leg," Voshka prompted, gently pushing his leg from the Blondie's abdomen. Enyu moved his leg away, revealing his own nakedness. His cock, limp just a moment before, began to

swell and lengthen as he watched the Commander pleasure his Master.

Omaki was in utter bliss, his eyes closed as Voshka's hands and mouth began exploring his body, his warm tongue flicking teasingly across his skin. When the man moved lower, pushing his legs open to position himself between them, and took the Blondie's engorged organ into his mouth, he unleashed a long moan, his fingers tangled in Voshka's silky-soft, dark hair.

"Oh, Voshka."

Frowning, Enyu got up on his knees, sitting back anxiously on his heels. "What can I do, Commander Khosi?" he asked, rather loudly. Then, when Voshka did not answer right away, he poked at the man's arm. "Commander Khosi?"

Voshka raised his head, his eyes half-shut with lust. "What is it, little pet?"

"I want to pleasure my Master, too."

"Indeed. Well then, suppose I have your Master turn over and get onto his knees? I'll taste him from behind and you can do as you please. That is, if he is amenable to the idea."

Lord Ghan needed no further invitation, hurriedly repositioning himself for a good rimming, legs wide apart. He looked back at Voshka, grinning.

Enyu was equally happy with this arrangement and proceeded to attend to his Master's rigid erection with his mouth while the Commander explored him even more intimately with his tongue.

"Sweet Jupiter," Omaki breathed, gasping and rocking back against Voshka's mouth, anxious for more stimulation. "Oh yes. This is *perfect*."

Commander Khosi, while enjoying these activities immensely, was now troubled by a stubborn erection that demanded his consideration. He reached out and found Enyu's hand, bringing it to his engorged cock and encouraging the pet to fondle him as he pleased the Blondie. Enyu cooperated fully, and Voshka, finally aroused beyond bearing, began to moan, the vibration of his mouth against Omaki's portal stimulating him even more.

"Oh, that's it, that's it!" Lord Ghan cried, his lips parted and his

eyes half-closed, so overcome with pleasurable sensations that he was almost drooling.

Voshka could bear it no longer. He withdrew and repositioned himself, replacing his tongue with his organ and inching his length into the Blondie's ass with a deep, resonant groan.

Omaki bucked back against him, accepting his full measure. "Give me a good fucking," he hissed.

"Indeed I shall," the Commander replied, his voice harsh with lust.

"Keep doing that, Enyu," Lord Ghan instructed. "Just like that, with your tongue."

Enyu mumbled his assent, his mouth filled with his Master's arousal.

"I'm going to climax any second," the Blondie announced, "and you must drink every drop."

Voshka dug his fingers into Omaki's hips, pulling him back as he began thrusting firmly—and then violently—into his sanctum.

"That's very...*oh, yes!* Here it is, Enyu!" Lord Ghan gave a loud grunt and then climaxed, expelling his anxious seed into his pet's waiting mouth. His release triggered a contraction of his inner muscles, the spasms clamping down on the Commander's organ.

"*Gaman help me,*" Voshka groaned, eyes half-closed and glimmering with lust. "How I do *love* Blondies!" In a matter of seconds he was brought to the brink by Omaki's unbearably erotic twitching. He ejaculated, shuddering as copious amounts of aphrodisiac-induced semen were milked from him by the Blondie's contractions. Every muscle in his body quivered as he groaned his pleasure.

Enyu, unable to wait for anyone to see to his own needs, brought himself to orgasm with his own hand, adding his sex cry to the mix.

"That was probably," Omaki gasped, after a moment, as he collapsed onto the bed, "the best sexual experience I've ever had."

"I'm rather pleased to make your acquaintance as well," Voshka agreed, joining him on the bed, his eyes closed with contentment.

"What about me, Commander Khosi?" Enyu demanded.

Voshka opened an eye, smiling. "You were delightful, little pet. And you needn't keep calling me 'Commander Khosi.' Vosh will

suffice.”

“Was I good, Master?” Enyu continued to probe, rubbing up against Omaki’s body.

“As always, Enyu. You’re a good pet.”

Smiling, Enyu settled down beside his Master, with the Commander on the Blondie’s other side, and the three of them proceeded to fall fast asleep.



TAI RUSHED AROUND THE KITCHEN, DECIDING to concentrate on making sure the dinner was absolutely perfect rather than dwelling on Master Iason’s threat to punish him. There was nothing he could do about the situation now, and he knew from experience that once the effects of the cider wore off, everyone in the household would be famished.

Since he was no longer sure when the dinner hour would be, he decided to set everything out on the table in warming domes. That way, whenever the guests finally gathered in the hall again, all would be ready.

He had already set the table using their best Aristian crystal and silver-trimmed plates and now proceeded to lay the dishes out. Not realizing that the Blondies and other Elite usually ate separately from the attendants and pets—since Iason never practiced this custom in his own home and had not advised him otherwise—Tai had extended the table to allow everyone to sit at it, transforming the room into a banquet hall. He had put a fine white tablecloth on the table with an intricate red and yellow design along the trim, and added several arrangements of white candles. In addition, vases of red and yellow Amoian roses, newly opened, lined the table at intervals.

He had prepared the menu according to Lord Mink’s rather exact specifications: an Aristian pheasant, slow-roasted over a live fire, a lamb’s head boiled to tender perfection, skewered *kalama* roots and mushrooms, stewed apples with cinnamon, fresh tossed greens with a tangy Amoian vinegar dressing, blue sweet corn off the husk, steamed snails, mashed potatoes with pheasant gravy, hot buns just out of the oven, brushed with melted garlic butter, and tender winter sprouts

smothered in a rich cheese sauce. To drink, there was the finest wine, flavored waters and cold Gardanian *cowberry* tea, or any number of selections from the beverage dispenser, which he had thankfully finally fixed, for the more finicky diners.

And of course, coffee and dessert.

The food was carefully arranged on the long table, warming domes over each dish, and Tai stood admiring his work, pleased with how everything had turned out. At that moment, Odi came into the hall and, spying him, made straight for him.

"Tai," he whispered, a bit breathlessly.

The Aristian turned, smiling. "You're back! I didn't see—"

His reply was silenced by the bodyguard's demanding kiss. Odi's hands roamed his body wildly, eagerly, even as his tongue swirled insistently in his mouth.

Tai broke away. "Don't tell me you drank the cider!"

"Hmmm?" Far too aroused to bother replying, Odi was kissing him again, this time with more urgency.

Tai tried to back away, but the bodyguard pinned him to the wall, forcing an impatient hand down his pants.

"Oh! Odi! We...we can't!" Blushing, even as he was responding to his lover's groping fingers, Tai turned his head away, trying to escape his kiss. "The Blondies will be coming to dinner at any moment, and I should be prepared."

"Hush," Odi whispered, biting his neck.

Tai yelped. "That hurt!"

"I'm sorry but...oh, Tai. I simply *must* have you. Right now!" He nuzzled the boy's throat, making his way up to his ear. "You're quite ready for me."

"Be that...be that as it may," Tai gasped, "we can't do this now, Odi! I have to make sure everything is ready!"

"Everything is fine," the bodyguard replied dismissively. "I need to be inside you. NOW."

"But—"

Refusing to take no for an answer, Odi picked up his reluctant lover and threw him over his shoulder, carrying him off to his bedroom.

“Odi! *Put me down!*”

“I will. When we get to the bed.”

“I can’t leave my post!”

“You can tell Iason I dragged you off and had my way with you,” the bodyguard replied, giving Tai’s ass a smack.

“Ow! But I told you, I’m not ready for this!”

“Then I suggest you make yourself ready,” the bodyguard replied. He entered his room and made for the bedroom, throwing Tai roughly down on the bed. “Get undressed.”

Tai stared up at him, paralyzed by the man’s hungry expression. Odi waited, hands on his hips. “Shall I undress you, or are you going to obey me?”

“Well,” Tai began, uncertainly.

Odi pulled off his own shirt, his muscles flexing as he tossed it aside. He unzipped his pants, releasing his sizeable erection with a small grunt of relief. Tai eyed him anxiously, worried, yet at the same time mesmerized by his determined manner.

Stripping off his pants, the bodyguard got onto the bed, tugging on Tai’s shirt. “I said, get undressed.”

“I’m afraid,” Tai whimpered.

“I’ll go slowly,” Odi replied, though he wondered if he would really be able to keep this promise. He was so aroused he felt ready to burst. With unveiled impatience, he assisted Tai out of his clothes, ripping off his shirt and tugging his pants down, and then tossing them behind him. Then he moved on top of the Aristian, enjoying Tai’s warm nakedness as he prodded his mouth open with his tongue.

Tai made a noise that was lost in the bodyguard’s mouth; Odi responded by flipping onto his back, positioning the Aristian on top of him where he could more easily access his bared ass. He began squeezing the young man’s rump, spreading him, and then—after wetting a finger in his mouth—he slipped a digit into him, wiggling his finger.

Tai, for his part, found this agenda both stimulating and frightening. He squirmed in an attempt to escape Odi’s probing finger, which only had the effect of exciting the bodyguard even more.

“Don’t resist,” he whispered. “I’m going to make you mine now,

Tai.” With his other hand, he began coddling the young man’s erection, enjoying his whimpers and gasps and the alternating looks of fear and desire on his face.

“Odi,” Tai pleaded, “I’m not...ready.”

“Yes, you are. It’s time, Tai.” The bodyguard inserted a second digit, moving both fingers more purposefully to stretch him open.

“Oh!” Tai closed his eyes, and then opened them, gazing down at Odi with unmistakable arousal.

Odi moved his thumb over the head of his shaft, spreading a bit of early seed over the tip of his cock. “You see? You’re enjoying this.”

Although Tai could not argue with this observation, he was feeling extremely vulnerable and helpless as Odi continued to prepare him for the inevitable. The man yanked open the drawer on the table by his bed, knocking over a lamp in the process. He cursed, but after some fumbling in the drawer he found the tube of lubrication he wanted and proceeded to rub the ointment over his ready member. When he was finished with this he put his hands firmly on Tai’s hips, causing the Aristian to whimper again.

“No, Odi,” he pleaded.

“I thought you were prepared to give yourself to me?”

Tai bit his lip, feeling uncertain.

Odi was already lifting Tai’s hips, positioning him over his fully erect cock, and shaking with anticipation. He couldn’t stop now, no matter what Tai said or did, and so he desperately hoped the Aristian would relax a bit, now the critical moment was imminent.

“Go slow,” Tai whispered, suddenly realizing that—whether he was ready or not—Odi was taking him. “You promised you would go slowly.”

Expelling a small breath, the bodyguard impaled him onto his waiting erection, gaining admittance.

Tai yelped, grabbing his arms in an attempt to stop his descent. “It hurts! Don’t go any further!”

Groaning, Odi tried to pause for a moment, but found the temptation to penetrate too strong; ignoring Tai’s pleas, he continued to lower him onto his shaft, thrusting up to achieve total penetration.

Tears now fell from Tai’s cheeks onto the bodyguard’s chest as he

struggled with the pain of being opened for the first time.

"I'm sorry," Odi mumbled, though he kept the Aristian's hips firmly in his hands, holding him captive. He closed his eyes, and then opened them halfway, looking up at him. "Now you're *mine*, Tai. I'm completely inside you. Try to relax. I want this to feel good for you, too."

Tai sniffed, wiping his face and nodding. Although the penetration had been even more painful than he had imagined it would be, now it was done. He was straddling Odi, the bodyguard's organ pressing against his insides. He was no longer a virgin.

Odi was beside himself with desire. "You look so sweet and sexy, Tai, straddling me like this. You're so tight, I can hardly stand it. Please don't cry."

"I'm trying not to."

Gazing up at him through lust-filled eyes, the bodyguard began moving Tai's body against his organ, thrusting as he raised and lowered the young man's hips. "You feel so good. I won't last long."

After a few moments, Tai did begin to relax, enjoying the feeling of the man deep inside him. He reached down and fumbled with his erection, suddenly wanting release.

"Odi," he breathed, his cheeks flushing hot. "That feels good, when you...*oh! Right there!*"

"Sexy boy," the bodyguard hissed. "That's it, rock against me, just like that."

"I like it!" Tai exclaimed. "There's something special in there...*oh!*"

"You feel that, do you?" Excited, Odi increased the cadence of his fuck, thrusting and moving Tai against him with mounting urgency. He slipped his hand, still wet with lubricant, around the young man's erection, eliciting cries of delight from the eager Aristian.

"Feels good, feels good! Your hand and...inside me, *oh!*"

"Good boy! Oh, fuck! I'm coming!"

With that, Odi climaxed, followed immediately by Tai, who cried out his excitement with such enthusiasm that the bodyguard almost laughed.

Afterwards, as he helped Tai move off him and onto the bed beside him, he leaned over and kissed his cheeks where the tears had dried.

"I think you enjoyed that, at least at the end. Did I hurt you very much?"

"A little," Tai conceded. "But not at the very end."

"Good. I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. I just had to have you, I'm not even sure why."

"It was the cider," Tai answered, frowning. "I accidentally served an aphrodisiac in the punch. Master Iason is very angry about it."

Odi laughed. "That explains it. I was wondering why the great hall was in such disarray and why everyone had retreated to private rooms. Well, I hope he won't be too hard on you."

"So do I," Tai whispered, worried. "He said he wasn't through with me. What do you think he'll do?"

"You'll probably get a few strikes from that taming stick of his," Odi guessed. He pulled him close and kissed his shoulder. "So, you've given yourself to me now, Tai. And I was the *first* one." The bodyguard seemed rather pleased with this observation, smiling contentedly.

"I don't know if I gave myself to you, exactly," the young man corrected. "More like you *took* me."

"Fair enough," Odi laughed. "But now you're mine, completely."

Tai found himself smiling at this as he snuggled up against him. He was glad they had finally done it. And, even though he had resisted most of the way, he had secretly admired Odi's confident manner, his insistence on taking what he wanted, even if Tai was unwilling to give it. It was this quality of self-assurance that the Aristian found particularly attractive in his lover. He liked, too, how Odi insisted that he belonged to him now.

It felt good, belonging to someone.



IT WAS LATE BY THE TIME THE BLONDIES began to make their way back to the great hall. They had all engaged in some sort of sexual encounter, most of them spending the entire evening enjoying one pleasure after another.

But now, as the stimulating effects of the cider finally began to

wear off, the consequences of having enjoyed hours of sexual gratification became apparent to all.

"I'll never be able to ejaculate again," Raoul lamented, groaning as he sunk down into one of the chairs in the great hall.

"Nor will I," Xian agreed, wincing as he sat down on the divan. "I think I pulled a muscle I didn't even know I had."

"My ass hurts," Yousi announced, sighing loudly as though trying to mimic the other Blondies.

"Does it, now?" Lord Am remarked, exchanging a look with Xian. They both turned to Heiku, who shrugged, grinning.

Lord Mink was next to arrive in the hall, looking decidedly spent. He sat down near the others, too tired to even offer greetings.

"Where's Omaki?" Heiku asked, looking around.

"Last I saw, he was in Iason's bedroom," Raoul commented.

Lord Quiahtenon walked over to the door, pounding on it. "Hey! Omi! Were you planning to join the party?"

After a few moments Omaki emerged, grinning sheepishly. He was followed by the Commander, who was struggling to put his boots back on, and who then excused himself and made for the bath hall. Enyu stumbled into the great hall behind them, looking half-asleep.

"Are you telling me you had sexual congress with the Commander?" Heiku laughed.

Lord Ghan shrugged. "What can I say? He was great in bed."

Even Iason smiled at this, but refrained from comment. "Riki," he called out, as soon as the mongrel made his appearance in the hall. "Bring us some wine."

The mongrel stopped in his tracks, looking incredulous. "What the fuck? Do I look like an attendant to you?"

"You look like my pet," Lord Mink replied smoothly, "who will do as he's told or face the consequences."

"Where's Toma...or Tai?" Riki replied, ignoring him.

"That's a good question. I have an issue that needs addressing with Tai."

"He's probably hiding from you," Lord Sami teased.

"What the hell was in that punch anyway?" Heiku demanded.

"I already told you," Iason replied irritably. "Tarnacsian cider."

"Aww, don't be too hard on him," Riki pleaded. "You seemed like you had a pretty good time."

Iason smiled slightly at this. "Are you going to obey me, Riki, or shall I turn you over my knee in front of our guests?"

The mongrel rolled his eyes, making for the bar with obvious reluctance and muttering something about being Iason's slave and how Blondies were all lazy and inconsiderate, and perverted, to boot.

"What was that?" Iason asked sharply.

"I wasn't talking to you," Riki replied, bristling.

"Pet—"

"Tai!" Riki greeted the Aristian, who rushed into the hall looking decidedly flustered, with obvious relief. "They want wine. They were trying to make *me* get it."

"I'm sorry, Sir Riki," Tai whispered. "Wine, for everyone?"

"Actually, I'd prefer cognac," Raoul said.

"As would I," Xian agreed.

"Wine for everyone else?" Tai clarified, looking hesitantly toward the Blondies, though too frightened to make direct eye contact with Master Iason.

"Wine is good. No wait: make that *punch*," Heiku quipped, sending the others into stitches.

Tai blushed, looking away.

"I have an announcement to make," Lord Ghan said. "I'm going to be throwing a Weekend Bash in a few weeks and you're all invited, provided you all bring something."

"I think Iason should bring the drinks," Raoul replied, quick as lightening.

The other Blondies laughed loudly at this, while Lord Mink only rolled his eyes. He turned to look at Riki, who had made himself comfortable on the bar counter.

"Pet, get down from there. How many times must I tell you? And bring me my wine."

Riki scowled, jumping down from the counter with obvious annoyance. "Tai's getting it."

"But I want *you* to bring me mine."

For a moment the mongrel looked as though he would protest. He

stood, one hand on his hip, meeting the Blondie's gaze with defiance. Why was Iason acting in such a manner, after the evening they had just shared?

Lord Mink watched him, curious to see what Riki would do. After a long moment, the mongrel finally shrugged, running a hand through his unkempt hair. He retrieved a glass of wine and brought it to the Blondie, smirking.

"Here's your wine, *Master*," he said with exaggerated deference.

Heiku snickered at this, finding Riki's antics, as usual, to be rather comical, though Lord Am was not at all amused.

"Are you going to let him get away with that?"

"Why don't you shut the fuck up, Raoul," Riki snapped, without even thinking.

Of course, this was completely unacceptable. "Riki," Iason scolded, taking the wine and putting it on the table beside his chair before pulling him onto his lap. "You know better than to address a Blondie directly, and in such a manner."

"But he's being a dickhead," Riki complained, though in a low voice.

Lord Am flustered at this while the others tried, unsuccessfully, to hide their amusement at Riki's appellation for the great Blondie.

"That's enough. Now, apologize to Raoul, this instant."

Riki frowned, struggling with a deep-seated urge to disobey him. He felt the Blondie's grip tighten on his arm—almost painfully—as Iason made clear he would have his way on the issue.

"Riki," Iason whispered in his ear, "don't make me punish you. Do as I say. *Now*."

Sighing, Riki choked down his pride and turned toward Raoul, though he couldn't bear to look directly at him. "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you," he said, finally, his face flushing red.

"And how do you address a Blondie?" Iason prompted.

"*Sir* Raoul," Riki added, though with obvious bitterness.

Lord Mink released his grip on his arm, setting him on his feet and giving him a smack on his rump. "Watch yourself, Riki."

Raoul, though not completely satisfied with the sincerity of his apology, was nevertheless at least appeased that Iason had forced the

mongrel into submission. He nodded, almost dismissively, turning to Omaki.

"Is that your stomach, or mine?"

"Mine, I think," the Blondie admitted. "I'm famished."

"As am I," Lord Am replied.

The others voiced their agreement.

"Dinner is ready," Tai announced.

This brought loud exclamations of approval.

"Very good," Lord Mink replied, sounding the dinner chime. The Blondies all headed toward the table, while the rest of the pets and attendants came into the hall, looking around uncertainly.

"Where are we supposed to sit?" Ru whispered to Katze.

Katze frowned, shaking his head. "Master Iason?"

The Blondie glanced up and, suddenly realizing the situation, sighed. "It seems Tai wasn't aware of our customs." He gave Katze a pointed look, as though he were somehow at fault.

Katze raised his eyebrows, almost daring to challenge the Blondie—for he certainly had not been told it was *his* duty to inform Tai of anything—but he managed to hold his tongue.

Lord Mink, however, caught his expression, giving him a sharp look. "Did you have something to say, Katze?"

"No, Sir," Katze purred, lowering his eyes, though he almost choked on the words.

"Very well. Let's not waste time rearranging tables. Everyone sit down."

And so, everyone sat together at the table, Blondies at one end and the pets and attendants at the other. Commander Khosi returned to the hall and took his place next to Iason, who sat at the head of the table.

Just as everyone was about to begin eating, Iason looked to the other end of the table, realizing the guest of honor was missing.

"Where's Aki?"

12

Yousi's Logs

"BLOODY HELL," RIKI GROANED, LETTING HIS FOREHEAD hit the empty plate before him. "Can we eat? I'm starved!"

Iason shot him a warning look, though the mongrel was too absorbed in his own discomfort to see it. "Riki, straighten up. We'll not start without our guest of honor."

"I'll get him," Omaki offered, and then, still sitting firmly in his chair, bellowed, "Aki!"

Startled by the sudden yelling, Yousi—who was very carefully sipping the expensive Aristian Red Emperor poured nearly to the brim of his glass—spilt his wine, nearly jumping out of his chair. Xian snorted, inhaling his cognac into his nose. Tai and Toma both came running to clean up the spilled wine, while Yousi apologized repeatedly, his face reddening from embarrassment.

"Don't go to any trouble on our account, Omi," Raoul remarked wryly.

"Stop apologizing, Yousi," Heiku whispered, putting a hand on the Blondie's shoulder. "You didn't do anything. Hear me? Yousi? Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes, s-sorry," Yousi stammered.

"I just told you to stop apologizing," Lord Quiahtenon answered. Then he leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Or do I need to discipline you?"

Yousi, calmed by Heiku's teasing, smiled.

"Oh, all right. Usually he comes running." Omaki sighed, pushing his chair back and rising slowly to his feet. He looked toward Juthian, frowning. "Weren't you going to take them swimming?"

Juthian, surprised to be directly addressed by the great Blondie, stared back, eyes wide. "Yes, Sir, that is, Lord Ghan, but they started...um...running around and I couldn't catch them, and then," Juthian's gaze flitted toward his Master and he stopped, unsure how to finish his explanation for what had detained him.

"Ah yes," Lord Sami continued, quickly, "I required Juthian for something...urgent."

"Something urgent being throwing him facedown on the table?" Sarius whispered, causing snickers and stifled giggles from those around him.

"Sarius," Heiku scolded sharply.

"Sorry, Master," Sarius murmured, hanging his head. It was not often he was reprimanded by his Master, and he was shamed by it, though all the Blondie had done was say his name.

A horrible thought suddenly occurred to Omaki—a terrible, frightening thought—and without another word he dashed from the great hall, running down the guest wing toward the pool area.

"Aki!" he yelled. "Answer me!"

But no answer was forthcoming and Lord Ghan, now seized with panic, ran into the indoor garden, leaving the door wide open.

"Aki!" He looked into the pool, relieved to find it empty, and then made for the outdoor garden, his hands trembling as he opened the door.

When he saw his precious Aki asleep by the fountain next to Suuki, who was also asleep, he nearly wept from relief. He crouched down, smiling at the way the two boys were tangled together, one leg sprawled over the other, capes intertwined, Aki's helmet and Suuki's makeshift saucepan helmet discarded some feet away next to an abandoned squirt gun. Aki was sucking his thumb, a habit the boy could not seem to break, and one that Omaki found especially endearing. For a long moment he watched the boys sleep, wishing he could gather up Aki and simply leave Amoi, taking him somewhere far from Jupiter's reach.

“Ah. You’ve found them.” Iason came up behind him, smiling at the boys, who seemed to be completely dead to the world.

“It must be the cider,” Lord Ghan guessed. “They were pretty excited earlier.”

“Can you wake them?”

“Aki?” Omaki spoke the word gently, giving the boy a small shake. “Wake up, little love.”

“Mmmm?” Aki opened one eye, looking sleepy and confused.

“You’re missing your own party,” the Blondie teased. “Or shall we give away the gifts to the guests?”

At this, Aki was wide awake, sitting up so abruptly that he woke Suuki, who looked so disoriented the Blondie had to smile.

“Don’t give away my presents,” Aki yelled.

“Hush, now,” Omaki scolded, reaching out to straighten the boy’s tussled hair. “I was only teasing you. But get up, everyone is waiting. It’s time for dinner.”

“Hooray! I’m starving!” Aki jumped to his feet, yanking Suuki’s arm impatiently. “Come on! We’re missing it!”

“Wah?” Suuki mumbled, without moving from his spot on the floor. He stared ahead into open space, feeling extremely tired and confused.

“Give him some time to wake up,” Lord Ghan admonished. “Stop pulling on his arm, Aki.”

Lord Mink stepped forward, crouching down before the sleepy boy. “Would you like me to carry you, Suuki?” he asked gently.

Nodding, Suuki reached out and cuddled up against the Blondie, letting his head rest against his chest. Iason rose, lifting and carrying the boy easily.

“Where are your clothes, Aki?” Omaki demanded.

Aki froze as if struck by a profound thought, looked down at his feet, and then began robotically rotating in place, pivoting on one foot.

“Aki?”

“I’m thinking!” Aki replied.

“Well, where did you take them off?”

“I think I saw some clothes in the swimming area,” Iason

remarked.

"Oh! We took them off to go swimming," Aki remembered. "But then we never went. Because then Enyu started chasing me. He was naked, too."

"I'm hungry," Suuki whispered, one hand gripping Lord Mink's tunic while the other fondled the soft wispy strands of the Blondie's hair.

"Dinner is on the table, we just need to get you dressed," Iason answered, heading towards the indoor pool area.

"Your hair is pretty," Suuki observed, his voice raspy from sleep.

"That is very kind of you to say."

"My hair isn't special," the boy added, a little sadly.

"That's quite untrue. You have the hair of an Elite, which is silver, and you should be proud of it."

At this, Aki frowned, turning to look up at Iason. "Am I going to have Leet hair too?"

"Yes," Iason replied. "You will have streaks of silver put into your hair, Aki. We will take care of that next week at the pet Academy."

"The pet Academy?" Aki repeated, puzzled. "Why am I going there?"

Omaki looked toward Iason, a bit surprised at this announcement as well.

"The pet Academy is the only place that legally can modify hair," the Blondie explained. "They're quite good at it. I'm sure you'll be very pleased."

"Can Suuki come with me?" the boy asked, excited.

"If he has permission."

"I want to go," Suuki asserted.

"Ah. Here they are." Lord Ghan spied the boys' clothing, which had been discarded by the pool. Iason put Suuki down and the boys both dressed quickly.

"I'm hungry," Suuki whimpered.

"Me too!"

"I confess I could use a good meal," Omaki remarked.

The party made their way back into the great hall, their appearance greeted with cheers, applause and relief by the waiting

guests, who were all still sitting at the table, tortured by the sight and aromas of the food under the warming domes.

At this, Aki smiled shyly, pleased to be so cordially greeted.

“Woo hoo! Okay kid, sit down,” Riki instructed. “Let’s eat!”

“Riki,” Iason scolded.

“What? I’m about to pass out from hunger!”

“Riki, you will keep quiet or I’ll have you go to your room, without dinner.”

Sighing dramatically, the mongrel then dutifully quieted, not wanting to jeopardize his place at the table.

Aki and Suuki finally situated in their chairs, and both Blondies having returned to their seats, everyone looked to Iason for permission to begin.

Lord Mink looked at the table, nodding. “The food looks splendid. So. In honor of Sir Aki, the newest member of the House of Mink, I proclaim this dinner—”

“Master Iason, Lord Chi is here to see you,” Askel announced from the intercom.

Everyone groaned at this last minute interruption.

“Bloody hell,” Iason sighed.

The pets and attendants all snickered at this, finding such mongrel-like vulgarities coming from the dignified Blondie highly comical. It was obvious to everyone where Iason had picked up this particular phrase.

Even Riki, who had been pouting after being reprimanded, had to smile.

“Shall I let him in?”

“Don’t let him borrow any sugar,” Xian commented dryly.

Lord Mink nodded, clearly annoyed. “Yes, yes. Send him in.”

The door hummed open and everyone turned to watch Megala Chi, looking rather nervous, step into the foyer. “Oh dear,” he murmured, “I seem to have interrupted something.”

“It’s quite all right,” Iason replied smoothly. “Come and join us, Megala.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly.”

“I insist.”

"But," now Megala began noticing everyone at the table, marveling at the strange assemblage of Elites, pets and attendants, "I really only wanted to speak to you in private, Iason, if that might be possible."

"Megala! Get your ass over here!" Omaki called out.

"Yes, we're just beginning, I insist you join us, and I won't take no for an answer," Lord Mink repeated, successfully concealing his irritation with his perfectly cordial manner. It was just like Megala to make a big production out of a simple thing like accepting a dinner invitation. "Come, come. I'll not have you standing there in the foyer. Toma, bring Megala a chair. Tai, bring him some wine—Icarian Amber is his favorite."

"Yes, Master," Toma and Tai murmured in harmony, rushing to retrieve the wanted items.

"Well, I suppose," Megala's gaze drifted to the warming domes that crowded the banquet table, his stomach growling from the incredible aromas emanating from the room, "that is, I don't mean to be any trouble...."

"Here. Sit next to *Raoul*," Lord Sami teased with a mischievous grin.

Heiku snickered at this, and Raoul flushed red.

Commander Khosi, who had been observing the Blondies quietly, now found his attention focused on Megala Chi, who still stood uncertainly in the foyer. He eyed the Blondie with unveiled admiration, deciding that Megala was next on his list of seduction.

He smiled, scooting his chair a bit closer to Iason's. "Sit next to *me*."

Megala blinked, not quite sure how to respond to the invitation from the handsome, dark-haired stranger.

"Megala, this is Commander Voshka Khosi of Alpha Zen," Iason clarified, feeling a bit annoyed that Megala had made no further progress toward the table. "Commander, Lord Megala of the House of Chi."

"A pleasure," Voshka purred.

Megala, completely unaccustomed to having anyone flirt with him openly, was further awed by the presence of the legendary Commander Khosi and continued to stand, motionless, as though

already paralyzed by the man's seductive arts.

"That's it," Lord Ghan announced, throwing his napkin down with obvious exasperation. He stood up, strode over to Megala, and proceeded to push him rather roughly towards the table. "Sit your ass down, we're all starving." Omaki forced him to sit down in the chair Toma had placed next to the Commander, and then returned to his seat.

"Your wine, Lord Chi." Tai held the wine glass out to the surprised Blondie, who had not expected Iason to remember that Icarian Amber was his favorite. It had been years since he had been to the Mink household for any sort of function, and if the truth were told, Megala had begun to feel a bit slighted, though he suspected that he had been dropped from Iason's invitation lists because of his jealousy over Raoul, years before. He had been, admittedly, a bit cold toward Iason, more than once, and he felt a little ashamed of it, now that the Blondie had invited him to join what appeared to be a very special, intimate party.

"Can we start?" Aki pleaded.

"Yes, yes," Lord Mink replied, raising a glass. "After we toast you, Aki."

"To Aki!" The guests all raised their glasses in unison, and thus, dinner finally commenced, everyone talking at once as the warming domes were raised and the food, at last, piled onto the plates. The slow-roasted Aristian pheasant, dripping with its own juices, was so tender that the meat fell from the bones, and all the side dishes were equally succulent, having been prepared with Tai's incomparable artistry in all things cuisine.

"Yummy!" Aki squealed, voicing with delightful economy the precise sentiments of everyone there, for the Tarnacsian cider had given them all insatiable appetites that made the culinary fare especially tempting.

"What is the...err...special occasion?" Megala asked politely.

"This is Aki's Guardianship Party." Lord Mink helped himself to a generous portion of roasted pheasant and mashed potatoes, spooning a liberal helping of the gravy onto both. This was unusual for the Blondie, who typically consumed surprisingly light meals relative to

his immense size, sometimes even forgoing dinner altogether. But even Iason was famished this evening, and Tai had simply outdone himself.

The feast before them was truly a work of art, the dishes laid out in a breathtaking spread amidst the elegant, white rounded vases of now fully-blown red and yellow Amoian roses. The antiquarian lit candles bathed the entire table in an ethereal glow enhanced by the light of the twin moons Ios and Erphanes, which at that moment shone, waxing soft, in the clear winter sky through Lord Mink's tall arching windows. The delectable aromas that emanated from the banquet's offerings, in concert with the visual seduction of the meal, worked to effect an additional intoxication on the cider-weary guests, who were now enjoying one final pleasure—perfectly prepared cuisine.

Megala looked puzzled. "Guardianship?"

"Iason's going to be Aki's Guardian," Omaki clarified.

"But I thought Aki was," Megala started, and then stopped, confused. "I heard he was from *your* House." He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I thought he was to be your *pet*."

"Aki is far too young to be a pet. He is Unclassified," Iason cut in smoothly, "and I will be his Guardian until he comes of age."

Megala blinked at this. "I didn't know there was such a thing."

"It's in the General Code," the Blondie replied, almost dismissively.

"Ah. The General Code," Heiku repeated, with an air of Elitist snobbery, imitating the stern voice of Headmaster Konami. "Now that makes for a stimulating read, wouldn't you say so, Yousi?"

"It is too boring to read," Yousi replied honestly, not picking up on the Blondie's joke.

The Elites all laughed at this.

"My thoughts precisely," Xian agreed. "Yousi, you are like a breath of fresh air."

Heiku shook his head, shuddering. "Remember when Headmaster Konami made us *memorize* entire sections of the Code?"

Raoul groaned. "Please don't remind me. I thought I would be the first Blondie to be kicked out of the Academy," he confessed.

"I thought you would be, too," Omaki shot back, "only for a

different reason.” He grinned, winking at Iason.

Lord Mink ignored this remark, though he glanced at Raoul, who smiled back at him, eyes shining. “Tai, this roast is *outstanding*.”

“*Everything* is outstanding,” Lord Am clarified, eliciting nods of approval and murmurs of general assent.

Tai gave a small bow from his chair, beaming. “Thank you, Master Iason.”

“Yes, I am very pleased, Tai. You have done so well, I will overlook, this once, the incident with the Tarnacsian cider.”

“Here here!” Heiku began tapping his crystal glass with his fork, and was joined by everyone else at the table, the tinkling crystal creating a symphony of approbation that was considered the highest form of praise in Amoian society.

“I say Tarnacsian punch ought to be *mandated* for any truly great party, from here on out,” Lord Ghan proclaimed.

“I concur!” Heiku grinned, giving Yousi a pointed look. “Wouldn’t you agree, Yousi?”

“Yes, we ought to have punch, otherwise people will get thirsty,” Yousi observed, not quite getting the point.

Tai, having earned his clemency, finally relaxed in his chair, basking in the glory of the moment. He dared meet Odi’s gaze, finding his lover watching him with proud eyes, a small smile twisting his lips.

From that point on, the dinner was transformed into an event, so great was the merriment and laughter of all the guests. The conversation was loud and furious, everyone talking at once, though the table remained divided into two separate circles of intercourse: the Elites, occupying the head of the table, with Iason Mink at the high seat, and the non-Elites, who all conversed among themselves at the other end of the table.

“So, Commander,” Heiku began, arching a brow, “what did you think of Omi here? Was he acceptable under the sheets?”

“I beg your pardon,” Lord Ghan protested, feigning offense. “Such private matters are hardly appropriate dinner conversation.”

“Quite delightful,” Voshka replied, winking at Omaki. “Almost as good as Iason was.”

"What?!" Heiku exclaimed, amidst shocked gasps from the other Blondies.

"*Almost?*" Omaki repeated, pretending to pout.

Iason stiffened, looking decidedly embarrassed. "Vosh," he whispered.

Raoul frowned at this, eyeing the Commander with renewed interest, and not a little jealousy.

Yui, who was now rather uncomfortable from his punishment at Raoul's hand and therefore feeling a bit distracted, happened at that moment to turn away from the conversation at his end of the table, catching his Master's dark look. He watched as Raoul leaned over to whisper something in Iason's ear and felt his stomach clench with jealousy.

"Is everything all right, Yui?" Daryl asked. "You look a bit upset."

Katze, catching the direction of Yui's gaze, shook his head. "You're going to have to get used to that, Yui. Those two go way back."

"I know," Yui whispered. "That doesn't make it hurt any less."

"You should consider yourself lucky, with your restoration and all. Frankly, I'm surprised Raoul had it done. He must think a great deal of you."

Yui was silent, his gaze now moving to his Master's new pet, who was chatting happily with the other pets at the very end of the table.

"No need for jealousy there, either," Katze remarked. "He's only a pet, Yui."

"What are you talking about?" Riki demanded.

"Relax. We're not talking about *you*," Katze answered.

"Hmmm," Riki pouted. Spying Lord Am leaning close to whisper in Iason's ear, he frowned. "Dickhead," he muttered.

"Hush," Katze warned.

"Relax. I wasn't talking about *you*," Riki quipped.

"I know who you were talking about. And you'd better watch yourself, Riki. Iason won't tolerate your insulting Raoul again."

"But he *is* a dickhead."

Yui's eyes flashed angrily. "Don't speak about my Master that way."

"Still starting fights, Riki?" Enyu taunted. "I would have thought

by now Iason would have beaten that out of you.”

Riki turned to the Xeronian. “Don’t start with me, catboy! I’ll stick your tail up your ass and make you rut backwards!”

Sarius snorted loudly at this. “How does one rut backwards, precisely?”

Katze put a hand on Riki’s shoulder, leaning close. “I’m serious. Calm down.”

“Is there a problem, Katze?” Iason’s voice rose above the din, and everyone immediately hushed.

“Hopefully not. Right, Riki?” Katze replied, nudging the mongrel with his foot.

Frowning, Riki struggled with his emotions, suddenly feeling exceedingly grumpy and irritable. He resented having to play the part of Iason’s pet when they had shared so much intimacy behind closed doors. He thought of Iason as his lover, not his Master, but the Blondie obviously intended to demonstrate to everyone there that he had complete authority over him. It seemed to him extraordinarily unfair; he’d hated the Blondie’s manner toward him, especially when he had submitted to the humiliation of wearing his chains especially to please him earlier that day. He had expected Iason to reciprocate by showing him special regard, and when the Blondie, instead, seemed even more distant and demanding, he felt betrayed.

“Pet. Come here.”

“I’m eating,” Riki whined, picking up his fork to demonstrate.

“Did you hear me? I told you to *come here*.”

All eyes were on the mongrel, who continued to sit.

“Riki!”

“Why are you being such a prick?” the mongrel finally demanded, eliciting shocked gasps from all the guests.

Katze sighed, removing his hand from Riki’s shoulder. “Real smart.”

Lord Mink stood up, the look on his face leaving no question as to his mood; in fact, he was furious. Riki certainly knew better than to challenge him in the presence of Elite guests, and he was mortified that he had done so, especially since he had been particularly hoping to show him off. Riki’s hard-won obedience would have been a great

boost to his authority, and thus his reputation, and Iason had mistakenly thought he had already achieved it. He slid his taming stick from its sheath. "Stand up, Riki," he whispered.

"Oh, all right." Exasperated, Riki rose to his feet, finally turning to look at him. "What do you want?" His gaze lowered to the taming stick, and he visibly flinched, genuinely surprised that the Blondie intended to punish him in the presence of his guests.

"If you think you can escape punishment now, pet, you're sadly mistaken," Lord Mink replied, walking toward him menacingly.

"Please Guardian," Aki pleaded, eyeing the taming stick with horror. "Don't punish him. Can you do it some other time? He'll be naughty again tomorrow. You can punish him then."

The guests all laughed at this, relieving the tension that had been building in the room.

Iason softened at Aki's request, and after a moment's consideration, returned his taming stick to its sheath. "Very well, since you have asked for it, Aki. This is your party, and it shouldn't be spoiled by a *naughty little pet*." As he spoke these last words the Blondie hold of Riki's arm, gripping him with punishing force.

"Hooray!" Aki exclaimed.

Lord Mink leaned down to whisper softly in Riki's ear. "Defy me one more time and I'll put you in the T-stand, pet."

Riki scowled at this, wincing from his firm grip. Though he cared little for the threat, he was thrilled to have avoided certain punishment. He sat down, shooting Aki a grateful smile once Iason had returned to his chair and the dinner had resumed.

The conversation started back up again, everyone resuming their previous merriment as though nothing had happened.

"You lucky bastard," Katze remarked, shaking his head. "I'm seriously worried about your ability to think straight. Were you dropped on your head, by any chance, as a child?"

Riki ignored him, turning to Aki.

"Hey kid. You're pretty cool."

"Aki," the boy corrected, smiling back.

"Sorry. I'm Riki."

"I know."

"Everyone knows you," Suuki added, with a giggle.

"Hmmm," Riki replied, raising an eyebrow.

"How did you do that? With your...little thingie?" Aki asked, pointing to his eyebrow.

Riki shrugged. "Dunno."

"Am I doing it?" Aki raised and lowered both eyebrows together, his eyes widening comically as he did so.

"No," the mongrel replied, smiling at the boy's attempt. "You look pretty cute though."

"Am I?" Suuki demanded.

The boy furrowed his brow in an odd way that made him look extraordinarily perplexed.

Riki laughed out loud. "No, you just look confused."

"Why did you do that, Riki? Insult your Master like that?" Sarius asked.

"You wouldn't understand," the mongrel replied, sighing.

"Riki, you can't speak that way to a Blondie," Daryl whispered, nervously. "You're lucky he didn't tame you, even if it is Aki's party."

Katze nodded. "You deserved it too, I might add."

"Yeah, Riki," Enyu chimed in. "You're naughty as ever, I see."

"And you're *weird* as ever," Riki shot back. "At least I don't orgasm in concert with the moon, you freak."

"There is nothing wrong with having an interval," Enyu replied, looking indignant. "Besides, my Master likes it."

"Yeah, well, everyone knows your Master is as perverted as they get."

"Hold on there, Riki," Ru protested. "Master Omaki is a great Blondie, you ought to show some respect."

"Hmmm. I have no real respect for *any* Blondie, although the one with the bionic arm, I'll admit, is rather cool."

"That's *my* Master," Sarius beamed proudly, surprised that the mongrel had complimented Lord Quiahtenon.

"How can you not respect the Blondies, Riki?" Juthian asked.

"Because he's a mongrel," Katze answered. "He has no respect for anything or anyone, not even himself."

"I object to that portrayal," Riki replied, his mouth half full of food.

"I respect myself."

"Riki," Katze scolded. "Try not talking when you have food in your mouth."

Enyu wrinkled his nose in disgust. "How vulgar."

In response to this, Riki opened his mouth, gifting the Xeronian with a most unappetizing view of his half-chewed food.

"Riki!" Daryl protested, disgusted. "Show some manners!"

"He doesn't have any, apparently," Enyu remarked.

"Nope," the mongrel agreed. "I'm vulgar and uncouth, and Iason likes me that way."

"I don't know about *that*, Riki," Katze argued. "I'm sure he would prefer if you were at least *civilized*."

"To be civilized implies one belongs to a civilization, and I do not," the mongrel retorted.

"Yes, you do, Riki," Daryl pressed. "You may have been a non-citizen before, but now you're Iason's pet, so you're part of Amoian society."

"I'll never be part of it, and I don't *want* to be part of it."

"Of course you do," Katze said pointedly. "There's nothing left for you in Ceres and you know it."

Riki was quiet, trying to hide how affected he was by Katze's remark by stirring his corn in with his mashed potatoes as though this were a project requiring significant mental resources.

He was feeling decidedly ambivalent of late, half inclined to give into Iason's demands and yet part of him instinctively rebelling—perhaps for one last time. It was as though he were simultaneously moving toward and away from the Blondie, from Eos, from all that he was and all that he was becoming, so that he no longer knew his own identity, or where he truly belonged. He hid his internal crisis by putting on an air of disdain, by pretending to be the mongrel he knew he would never be again, by being deliberately rude, vulgar, and shocking.

In truth, Riki was an intelligent young man who had now outgrown his mongrel skins but was simply unable to abandon them, and so forced himself into an unflattering likeness of his former self to conceal the man he was becoming.

"You ought to have punished him anyway," Raoul remarked, as Iason returned to his seat.

"I am not surprised that is your view," Lord Mink answered.

"You show him too much leniency. You know I'm right."

"Oh come on, Raoul," Heiku protested. "We all know you just wanted to see him be punished."

"He *deserved* to be punished."

"I daresay he'll be punished again, soon enough," Omaki observed.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about, Megala?" Lord Mink asked, turning to the Blondie who was listening to this conversation with great interest.

"Oh! I would rather talk to you in *private*," he murmured.

"Very well. Although I should tell you, these are my most intimate friends, and I would most likely tell them anyway."

"I see," Megala frowned, feeling decidedly uneasy. He knew his confession was not going to be taken well, and particularly because Lord Am was at the table, he now dreaded what he knew he had to do.

"Awww, Iason. Your most intimate friends? I'm touched," Lord Ghan exclaimed.

"We all know you're a bit touched...*in the head*, Omaki," Xian quipped.

"Am I one of your most intimate friends, too?" Voshka asked, with a teasing smile.

Omaki raised an eyebrow. "That depends on how you define *intimacy*."

"So, Commander, when exactly were you with Iason?" Heiku demanded.

"About half an hour after I first arrived, and most of this evening," Voshka replied, without missing a beat.

"Vosh!" Iason was clearly displeased, his face flushing dark.

Omaki leaned toward Heiku. "He calls him *Vosh*."

The Commander laughed. "Oh, come now, Iason. I was not the only one who enjoyed it."

Raoul, seething with jealousy, stabbed at his winter sprouts, sending one flying.

"Uh oh. Raoul's in one of his moods," Xian murmured.

Voshka, noting Lord Am's reaction, leaned close to Iason. "I seem to have intruded again."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," the Blondie replied, his face an impassive mask.

Puzzled, the Commander turned back to Raoul. As he studied the Blondie, he came to a sudden realization: this *Raoul* might well be the very same Raoul his brother Anori had spoken of—after all, he was a Blondie, wasn't he? He had been so distracted by the animated confusion of the lively dinner table conversation and then by Lord Chi that he had failed, until now, to make this critical observation. "You're Raoul Am," he stated.

Lord Am gave him a dark look. "Yes?"

"You knew my brother, then."

Raoul paled but then quickly regained his composure. "Yes, I knew him."

"To think all this time I've been jealous of you, when it turns out you're now jealous of *me*," the Commander laughed. "Ah, the irony."

"I beg your pardon? Why would I be jealous of you?" Raoul replied hotly.

There was an awkward silence.

"Raoul," Iason scolded in a low voice. "Have you forgotten who you're addressing? This is Commander Voshka Khosi!"

"I know who he is," Raoul replied levelly.

"How dare you insult my important guest!"

Voshka raised a hand, smiling in a friendly manner. "No harm done. I quite understand, I assure you. I didn't mean to step on any toes."

Raoul seemed to soften at this, though he said nothing more.

"As I was saying, Megala," Iason continued, trying to divert the conversation from its current course, "you might as well say what you've come to say."

Megala, who was observing the dynamics between Raoul, Iason and Voshka with transparent curiosity, cleared his throat.

Heiku groaned. "You're not going to start doing *that* again, are you?"

"Do what?" Megala protested, puzzled.

“That thing you do! With your...throat!”

I didn’t know I did a thing,” the Blondie confessed, looking mystified.

You do,” Lord Sami nodded. “It used to drive me crazy back at the Academy.

Horried, Megala looked from one Blondie to the next. “Why didn’t someone tell me?”

“We figured you knew,” Omaki replied.

Heiku frowned. “How could you *not* know?”

Megala, feeling exceptionally nervous over this new information, instinctively cleared his throat again, eliciting groans from the Blondies.

“Sorry,” he whispered, blushing.

Now the Commander, who had been watching poor Megala’s reactions to the revelation of a bad habit he hadn’t even known he’d possessed, took pity on the Blondie. He leaned over, resting a hand on Megala’s back to toy with his hair while he whispered seductively in his ear, “Perhaps you can show me what *other* things you can do with your throat?”

Megala was so surprised by this that he cleared his throat again.

Heiku dropped his fork, irritated. “Megala!”

“I can’t help it!” Lord Chi cried.

The surgeon held up his bionic hand, rotating his middle two fingers. “Do it one more time and I’ll stick these down your throat and rip out your larynx.”

“No, Heiku,” Yousi whispered, distressed over this threat and unable to comprehend that the Blondie wasn’t serious.

Lord Quiahtenon turned and gave Yousi a wink. “Relax, love. I was only teasing.”

“I’ll...I’ll try to stop,” Megala stammered, “but I didn’t even know I was doing it.”

“So,” Lord Mink continued, “what is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Well, I have...a confession to make. It’s rather embarrassing actually.”

The Blondies immediately quieted at this, all of them turning to

regard Megala with interest, except Raoul, who continued to brood as he ate.

"If it's about Raoul, we already know," Omaki teased.

"Yes, well," Megala's face flushed red as he stared down at his plate, "I suppose it does have something to do with Raoul."

Surprised, Lord Am stopped eating and looked up at Megala.

"That is, when I built the Eos Tower," Megala glanced at Iason, who was studying him with an inexplicable expression, "I might have built...certain...um...secret things. That is, secret *passageways*."

Lord Mink furrowed his brow at this. "What do you mean? You mean beyond what you've told me about?"

Megala nodded, looking a bit ashamed. "Yes. Quite a few, actually."

"What does this have to do with me?" Raoul demanded.

Megala took a deep breath, closing his eyes. He hated having to confess his perversions, especially to Raoul, but with the blueprints stolen, he knew it was critical, for security reasons, to finally tell them the truth. "I built passageways throughout the Tower so I could see what was going on. So I could...see into your room."

"What?!" Raoul stood up, furious.

"I stopped watching you years ago!" Megala added, frightened by the Blondie's dark look.

"So you *did* watch me!"

"I couldn't help it!"

"Of *course* you could help it," Iason snapped. "Do you mean to say you've been spying on me as well?"

"Oh no," Megala protested. "That is, well *yes*, maybe years ago, but I haven't—honestly I haven't—not for a long, long time!"

Lord Am threw his napkin down. "This is unconscionable!"

"I know!" Megala replied, almost whimpering.

"Did Jupiter know about these passageways?" Lord Mink probed.

"No! That's the thing! The...problem!"

"I don't know what you're saying."

"The blueprints! They've been stolen!"

The entire table had now hushed, all eyes focused on the scene unfolding at the head of the table.

"What's this?" Odi asked, frowning. "What did he just tell you? About the stolen blueprints?"

"Megala built secret passageways into the Tower to spy on Raoul and Iason," Heiku answered.

"You had *no right*," Raoul began, so angry he could hardly see straight. "I should tear you limb from limb!"

"I know! I know I had no right! I was young and...well...I was in *love* with you. I only wanted to watch you. I knew I couldn't have you. But I was just torturing myself. I finally stopped, I swear!"

Anders, who had been standing silently near one of the hall pillars during the entire dinner, stepped forward, looking decidedly alarmed.

"Are you saying there is a secret passageway leading to this suite?"

Megala sighed, nodding. "Yes, yes."

Ayuda, who had also been standing guard, exchanged looks with Odi. "This is serious."

"Agreed," Odi replied, standing up.

"It wouldn't have been a problem," Megala protested, "if they hadn't been stolen."

"But who would even know to steal them? Who knew you had built these secret passageways?"

"No one!"

"Someone must have!"

"Everyone, please. Remember this is Aki's party," Iason soothed. "Raoul. Sit down."

"How can you be so calm about this? Don't you realize—all those times—when we *thought* we were alone," Raoul began.

"Hush," Lord Mink hissed. "Let's talk about this later."

Aki and Suuki, not quite understanding why the Blondies were so angry, had both gleaned the one thing that was of any real consequence to nine-year-old boys: Eos Tower was full of secret passageways. The boys looked at each other, grinning.

"There *are* secret passageways," Aki whispered, excited.

"Yes, Raoul, do sit down, you're spoiling the mood," Heiku scolded.

Exasperated, Lord Am sat down, sighing loudly.

"Commander, I strongly recommend we leave the Tower

immediately,” Anders whispered.

Voshka waved his guard away. “No, no. Don’t be absurd. We’re in the middle of a delightful dinner.”

“But Commander—”

“You have my answer,” Voshka replied sharply.

“I must agree with him, Commander,” Ayuda announced. “This is a serious security breach. We should act immediately.”

Odi nodded. “Agreed.”

Surely we can at least finish dinner?” Iason replied with a loud sigh. “What is the probability that something is going to happen before we have a chance to finish dessert?”

The bodyguard frowned. “Well I can’t give you the *exact* probability, but since the blueprints were stolen, the risk is elevated, so—”

“Odi, sit down.”

“Please, you asked me to be Head of Security. I can’t protect you if you don’t let me do my job. At least let me investigate these...passageways.”

“You may do so, *after* dinner. Sit down.”

The bodyguard looked as though he were about to challenge Iason again, but upon seeing the Blondie’s firm look, he gave up, nervously returning to his chair.

“Commander—”

“Yes, Anders, I *am* your Commander. And I command you to return to your post and let us enjoy our dinner.”

Gritting his teeth with annoyance, Anders stepped back, though now he was extremely vigilant, looking around the penthouse anxiously.

“Iason, I’m afraid I also think—”

“Ayuda, we’ll discuss this after dinner.”

Ayuda sighed, forced to retreat to the wall next to Anders. The two bodyguards exchanged looks, a quiet understanding passing between them as they watched over those in the hall, both of them in a state of heightened awareness.

Ayuda took out his communicator, flipping it to text mode, and began messaging Odi to determine the increased security measures

that would need to be taken that evening. Odi quietly operated his communicator under the table with one hand, deftly organizing a strategy even as he appeared to be eating dinner.

Tai watched him, worried. He could tell by Odi's tight jaw that he was upset, and he could not help but admire the way the bodyguard managed to attend to his duties, even defying Iason's orders, in order to protect the Blondie and his important guest.

"So Megala," Heiku began, trying to restore a sense of the former merriment to the party, "what exactly did you *do* when you spied on Iason and Raoul?"

"Do you really have to ask?" Omaki quipped.

Megala blushed again but said nothing.

"Tell me Megala, did you build anything in *my* tower I should know about?"

Megala shook his head. "No. You know everything. And you watched me build it."

"Yes, I did," Lord Ghan replied, feeling rather pleased with himself. In truth, ever since Megala had confessed to him, on the one night they had shared together, that he had built secret passageways in the Eos Tower, he had never quite trusted the Blondie. So, when he commissioned him to build the Taming Tower, he had been very interested in the blueprints and the construction, personally inspecting every single space that was erected, and sometimes even halting construction to take measurements, wanting to be sure everything added up.

"What about my Suites?" Heiku asked, frowning. It had never occurred to him to wonder if there were any secret areas in the Denovian Royal Suites, but now that the issue was on the table, he realized that the existence of such passageways would pose a tremendous risk to his enterprise. The Suites housed ambassadors from the entire Quadrant, VIPs who chose Heiku's Suites when visiting Amoi not only for their luxury but for their guaranteed security.

"No, no. I promise," Megala smiled. "Yours was the first commission I received, after the Emporium. Everything was exactly as shown in the prints."

"If you're lying to me, I'll be forced to rip your heart out," the surgeon threatened, wiggling his robotic fingers menacingly.

Lord Chi shuddered at this, not quite sure if the Blondie was serious, but not doubting that he was *capable* of it; he now had two threats to his bodily organs, noting with distress that Heiku had used the phrase "rip out" with regard to both.

At the other end of the table, the non-Elites were whispering among themselves.

"What are they talking about?" Ru asked, confused.

"Lord Chi built secret passageways into the Eos Tower," Sarius reported, having listened closely to all the details, "so he could watch Iason and Raoul together."

"What?!" Toma exclaimed.

Katze nodded. "It's true. Actually there is at least one passageway I know about, besides the stairway to the Observatory."

"Where is it?" Riki demanded. "How come I don't know about it?"

"Take a wild guess, genius," Katze shot back.

"You mean you knew there was a secret passageway and you kept it from me?"

"Calm down. It wouldn't really matter if you knew, your pet ring would restrict you from leaving the penthouse. Even if you could leave, where would you go? Iason would find you. The ring has a tracer."

"Then why hide it from me?"

Toma and Katze exchanged looks. "Because...in all honesty, there is *one* way you could get out." Katze's gaze moved to Riki's groin. He raised a brow.

"What are you saying, that I'd castrate myself just to escape?" Riki laughed. "Only a complete idiot would cut off his own dick."

"Hmmm."

"No offense," Riki added, winking.

Katze nodded. "None taken."

"So Riki, are you saying freedom isn't worth as much as your sexuality?" Daryl asked.

The mongrel thought for a moment. "If it was, I'd have done it the first day Iason dragged me here. Why would I wait two bloody years

and be punished practically every other day and *then* do something like that?”

“Good point,” Katze remarked.

Aki, who had been listening to this conversation quietly while loudly crunching on ice from his Gardanian *cowberry* tea, now looked directly at Katze. “Can you show me the secret passageways?”

“I know only of one, besides the Observatory, I mean.”

“But can you show me?”

Katze shrugged. “I suppose there’s no harm in it now. Looks like we’re all going to find out pretty soon. Although don’t get too excited—Iason will probably have them all sealed off.”

Aki, who couldn’t imagine any purpose for a secret passageway beyond providing an exciting new forum for his playtime adventures—and given the complete absence of any sort of penthouse slides to compensate for his having left the Taming Tower—was horrified.

“Why is he going to do that!” he yelled.

“Hey, Aki. If you and I are going to get along, you’re going to have to stop yelling all the time,” Riki muttered.

“Oh, that’s rich, Riki. *You* telling him not to yell,” Katze teased.

“Sorry,” Aki mumbled.

“Aki, did you get your Greeting from Jupiter?” Juthian asked, smiling gently at the boy.

“Yes! She told me I was special,” he replied proudly.

“Did she now? What did she say?”

“I can’t remember exactly, except that I’m going to be a Leet.”

“She said he has special status. He’s Unclassified,” Ru clarified. “He’s even got a unique number: U-004M. She told him he was Iason’s ward until he matriculates and that he would be going to the Elite Academy.”

“She said I could go to the Amoian Guard Academy,” Aki remembered, brightening, “when I’m twelve.”

Ru nodded. “She did say that.”

“Wow, Aki. You should be very proud,” Juthian remarked. “Jupiter doesn’t hand out special status that often. Actually I’ve never even heard of anyone receiving it.”

Sarius shook his head. "I haven't either."

Aki beamed proudly.

"I'm not special," Suuki observed sadly.

"Of course you are, don't be absurd," Katze replied. "You're an Elite. It doesn't get any more special than that."

"Unless you're a Blondie," Daryl pointed out. "Then you're the Elite of the Elites."

"Why don't you think you're special, Suuki?" Juthian pressed gently.

The boy sighed. "I just know it, somehow."

"Sheesh, get the kid some therapy," Riki laughed.

"You're special," Aki asserted. "And plus you're my best friend."

Suuki brightened at this. "I am?"

"Yes! And we're going to Alpha Zen together, remember?"

"Why are you going to Alpha Zen?" Juthian asked.

"We're going to do our *Aprentage Ships* with Commander Khosi."

"Your what?"

"Our *Aprentage Ships*!"

"I think he means *apprenticeships*," Kahlan laughed.

"Ah, I see. You're going to be training under Commander Khosi, then," Juthian said with feigned reverence.

Aki nodded and the others all smiled at this, not realizing that the boys had truly been given invitations by the famous Commander.

"Speaking of the Commander, he sure is a good-looking fellow," Sarius remarked. "Not at all what I was expecting."

"Yes. Wouldn't you agree, Riki?" Katze asked, with a small smile.

Riki replied to this by flipping him off.

"Yes, he's very good looking," Enyu confirmed.

"So what exactly were you and your Master doing in Iason's bedroom with the Commander?" Sarius pressed.

The Xeronian smiled, his eyes dilating slightly. "I am not at liberty to say."

"Are we ready for dessert, I wonder?" Tai asked, rising.

"What's for dessert?" Aki cried.

"It's an Aristian Triple Chocolate Cake."

"*Triple Chocolate!*"

Tai nodded.

“Ah, Tai. Yes. I was about to call for dessert,” Lord Mink said. “Please bring coffee, as well.”

“Yes, Master. Let me just clear the table.”

“I’ll help,” Ru added, jumping to his feet.

“I can help, too,” Kahlan announced, standing.

“Me too,” Daryl said, but he was immediately stayed by Katze, who pushed him back into his chair.

“You’ll sit. I’ll help.”

Juthian, Yui and Toma stood up as well.

“Sarius,” Heiku hinted, in a low voice.

“Oh. Sorry, Master,” Sarius replied, standing up, though he had been hoping to get out of kitchen duty for once. Clearing the table was his least favorite responsibility. “I’ll help too, I suppose.”

Thus the table was cleared very quickly and the dessert brought in, which was consumed with great relish by all the guests, after which Aki’s presents were brought to the table, much to the boy’s obvious delight.

Aki had never opened so many presents and, endearingly, seemed equally excited by each gift. He received an electronic slate for school, equipped with holographic projection, several beautiful Elite shoulder wing pins for his clothing, shiny new white Elite boots, games and mind puzzles, a set of books on Ancient Amoian History during the Age of Vendal and the Dark Kings of Zahtu, a subscription to Tanagura Quarterly, and a holographic museum projection (Lord Mink’s gifts); a picture book of all known creatures from the Galaxy, classified and indexed according to genetic code, a transient room bubble generator, and a set of holographic full-length adventure movies from Xeron (Lord Sami’s gifts); a metal box of writing implements and various calculators, a Gardanian 12-day room creature (just add water), and a locked thought-book (Lord Am’s gifts); cherry drop candy from Yurenia, a medical encyclopedia, and a collection of rocks and stones from the Fourth Quadrant (Lord Quiahtenon’s gifts); a kaleidoscope, kites from Aristia, a floating sphere lamp, and emergency odor removal spray (Lord Xuuju’s gifts), a lifetime passcard to the Eos Tower Theatre Complex, a hover board,

an Aristian flute, and a state-of-the-art Independent handheld flip-phone communicator (Lord Ghan's gifts).

One final gift remained, a joint gift from Omaki and Iason. As soon as Aki opened it, a small, palm-sized sphere lifted out of the box with a quiet hum, hovering and spinning before Aki's face.

"Ohhh," Aki exclaimed, not exactly sure what it was.

The device immediately scanned Aki's retina, and then a series of lights flashed along its side. It then turned to Suuki, scanning him, and continued around the room, identifying everyone there.

"What is it?" Aki asked, thrilled.

"It's an X900 Guardian, from Xeron," Lord Mink replied. "Think of it as your security guard, Aki."

"It will protect you, wherever you go. No one will be able to touch you, without your permission," Omaki added.

"What happens if someone touches me?" Aki asked eagerly.

"Riki. Try grabbing Aki's arm."

Shrugging, the mongrel reached out to touch Aki, but as soon as he made contact, the Guardian whirled around and sped across the room, flashing red. "Move away from the boy. You have 3 seconds to comply."

Riki grinned, holding up his hands. "I surrender."

"Fascinating," Odi whispered, the first comment he had made since being hushed by Lord Mink.

"Yes, it's astonishing technology. Quite expensive, I might add."

"Where did you get it?" Voshka asked, intrigued.

"Katze found it for me on the Market. There are only five in existence."

"How much did it cost you?" Heiku asked.

"Five billion credits."

Everyone gasped at this sum.

Even Lord Am was surprised. "You paid five *billion*?"

"Omaki and I each paid one and a half. I asked Jupiter for the remaining two billion."

"And Jupiter gave it to you?"

The Blondie nodded.

"You hear that, Aki?" Juthian whispered. "Jupiter must think a lot

of you.”

“It was necessary,” Iason continued. “As my ward, Aki requires additional protection.”

Lord Ghan nodded. They had both agreed the device was essential for Aki’s security. His connection with the Mink household made him a target—not merely for Elite bullies at the Academy but for those who might try to use Aki in order to get to Iason. The device also recorded his every move, so that both Iason and Omaki could monitor his activities, though they both refrained from mentioning this.

“What would it have done, if Riki had tried to harm him?” Heiku asked.

“It would have paralyzed him temporarily with a stun laser, and then set off a loud alarm, alerting the nearest Security post as well as Omaki and myself.”

“Gee thanks,” Riki muttered.

“Brilliant,” Voshka remarked, nodding. “Only five in existence, you say?”

“Yes. The other four belong to various royalty and dignitaries on Xeron, Gardan, and Yurenia.”

“I must say,” Lord Sami sighed, pushing back from the table, “this was one of the best dinner parties I’ve ever been to, if not the *very* best.”

The others nodded their agreement.

“What’s next on the agenda?” Heiku mused.

“I think we should retire to the Observatory for a few drinks,” Iason replied, “and all of you are welcome to stay the night.”

Xian smiled. “Can we use that hot tub of yours?”

“Of course. You may select any of the available suites on the guest wing and you are welcome to full use of the pools, as well.”

“Are you sure you have enough rooms for all of us?” Lord Quiahtenon asked, having never spent the night in Iason’s penthouse.

“Yes, after Aki picks out his suite, there will be two suites left in the guest wing, and there are twenty empty rooms in the east wing, although those are not suites. They’re quite spacious though, and they do have a seating area, but no private baths.”

“A butterfly!” Aki exclaimed, as a bright green and blue butterfly

fluttered down onto one of the yellow roses on the table.

"Oh, dear," Omaki mumbled. "I might have let those out."

"We'll catch them," Aki offered.

Suuki nodded. "We can do it."

Lord Mink smiled. "Thank you, boys. But be very careful—try not to touch their wings. They're actually quite rare."

"We'll be careful!" Aki gently captured the fugitive butterfly in his hands, and then he and Suuki took off to return it to the pool sanctuary and search for the others.

"As for myself, I accept your invitation to stay the night, Iason," Heiku announced, "mostly because I feel far too lazy to drive back home. And I claim a suite."

"I accept as well," Lord Am confirmed. "And I'll take a suite."

"Damn!" Xian cursed. "I'm staying, though, even though I wasn't fast enough to claim a suite."

Omaki grinned. "Now that it's a party, I'll be staying as well. Enyu and I can stay in Aki's suite."

"I would like to stay," Yousi commented, looking a little uncertain, "if I am invited."

"Of course you are invited," Lord Mink replied.

"You can stay in *my* suite, Yousi," Heiku whispered, smiling suggestively.

"I should be going," Lord Chi murmured, rising.

"Not so fast," Voshka replied, reaching out to grab his wrist. He smiled up at the Blondie, who stared back at him, looking both perplexed and surprised.

Omaki feigned injury at this. "Vosh, you whore!" he accused.

"Megala, you're not going anywhere," Raoul remarked, glaring at the Blondie.

Iason frowned. "Yes, Megala, before you go, I'll have you show Odi and Ayuda where these...hidden passageways are."

"I'd like to know myself," Lord Am added.

Megala sat down, visibly trembling.

"What about us, Master Iason?" Toma asked, seeming to speak for all the non-Elites.

"After you finish cleaning up dinner, you are all free to do as you

please. Since it appears you'll all be staying, you can pick out your rooms on the east wing."

"I can give up my suite, Master," Toma offered, "for Lord Sami."

Pleased that Toma had surrendered his suite for the comfort of his guests, the Blondie nodded. "Very good. Thank you, Toma."

"I have a suite," Xian announced triumphantly.

"We all have suites," Heiku replied. "So you're gloating for no reason."

"After you pick out your rooms, you can go down to the Saloon, if you like. That is, if your Masters give you leave," Lord Mink continued, addressing the attendants and pets.

The Blondies all nodded their agreement, which caused a great deal of excitement among the pets and attendants. It was rare to be given a "night off" from all duties, especially with permission to visit the Eos Saloon, the hottest social gathering in all of Tanagura for non-Elites.

"Can I go, too?" Riki asked meekly, looking as though he expected Iason to refuse him.

"Yes, Riki. You may go."

Thrilled, the mongrel suddenly brightened, for the first time since he'd been reprimanded at the table. He had been privately fuming about the way Iason had treated him at dinner, and had half expected the Blondie to refuse him this privilege, although he would have been furious to have been the only one excluded from a night out at the Saloon.

The table was cleared and the Blondies rose, collectively groaning at the effort.

"Do we really have to go all the way up to the Observatory?" Heiku moaned. "I vote for sitting around the fire, down here."

"I second that," Omaki added. "If I can make it over to one of those chairs."

"I claim that big, comfortable-looking green chair," Lord Sami announced.

"That's Iason's chair," Raoul said.

"Oh. Well, I claim—"

"You can't claim chairs. It's first come, first serve," Heiku

challenged.

At this, Heiku and Xian gazed at each other and, like children, suddenly dashed over to the arrangement of chairs and divans around the fire. Lord Sami managed to reach the big blue chair first, the one that both of them wanted, and sat down with a victorious cry.

"It's mine!"

"I could *make* you give it up, if I really wanted to," Heiku advised, holding up his bionic hand and rotating the fingers threateningly.

Lord Mink shook his head. "Those two never change."

Voshka rose to his feet. "Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure to be in your company, although now I think I shall take your leave and retire to my room. I wonder if it would be too much trouble to have some of this delicious food sent there for my new pet? He hasn't eaten, and I'm sure he must be hungry."

"Of course, Vosh. Tai will bring the food to you."

"Why didn't you let your pet come to dinner?" Xian asked, curious.

"He is presently," the Commander answered with a mysterious smile, "occupied."

"Commander, I would like to deal with the security issue we discussed before, have I your leave to do so?" Anders asked anxiously.

"Yes, yes. Go do whatever it is you need to do; I feel quite safe leaving the matter in your hands."

Odi stood up. "Perhaps Lord Chi could show us the passageways now?"

"Yes, Megala, let's take care of that now," Iason agreed.

Megala nodded, standing up. "I'll show you. There's a viewing portal in your Master bedroom, actually."

Iason bristled at this. "Show me," he said quietly.

Megala then walked to the bedroom, followed by Iason, Raoul, Odi, Ayuda, and Anders, while everyone else crowded around not far behind, curious as well.

The Blondie paused at the closed door. "I don't have your access code," he stated.

"Well, that's something, anyway," Odi remarked.

Lord Mink stepped forward, his signature automatically triggering open the door. Sir Megala walked over to the bookshelves against one

of the walls. "It should be here. I think this vase is covering the portal," he stated, reaching toward the vase.

"That's a Vergatti," Iason winced. "Be *very* careful."

Lord Chi froze, not wanting to risk even touching it.

Raoul stepped forward. "I'll move it." With great delicacy, he gently lifted the heavy, orange-brown vase and held it.

Megala pointed to the space behind it. "It's right there."

Lord Mink squinted. "I don't see anything."

"It's got a holographic shield." The Blondie wiggled his fingers, disturbing the energy of the holograph.

"You bloody pervert!" Lord Am hissed.

"The vase, Raoul," Iason cautioned.

Megala bowed his head, ashamed.

"Do you have one of those in *my* bedroom, too?" Raoul demanded.

The Blondie nodded, blushing.

"You ought be to publicly whipped!"

"I know."

"You *will* be, if Jupiter ever finds out," Lord Ghan stated.

"You won't tell Jupiter, will you?" Megala pleaded, looking at Iason.

"Of course not. I would never give up a Blondie to Jupiter. In fact, I'm not so sure she would merely have you whipped. She might even tamper with your mind, as well."

"Thank you, Iason." The Blondie's admirable clemency made Lord Chi feel ashamed for having misjudged him for so many years.

"Perhaps *I'll* inform Jupiter," Raoul grumbled, under his breath. Iason stepped forward, gingerly taking the vase from him and setting it back on the shelf.

"Oh, please, Raoul. I'll make it up to you. I've been thinking about it, and I want to offer you terms of compensation."

"Let's hear them," he replied, crossing his arms on his chest. "They'd better be good."

"I'll build a fabulous seaside estate for you. One for you, and one for Iason, at my own expense. Anything you would like."

Lord Am couldn't help but feel tempted by the offer. He had been craving such a resort ever since he'd visited the immense seaside villa

belonging to Xanthus Kahn. "Bigger than Kahn's villa?"

"Oh, *far* bigger. And much grander; whatever you like, I shall build a palace for you, and for Iason."

Raoul smiled for the first time since Megala had arrived. "In that case, I accept your terms."

"As do I," Lord Mink agreed.

"Are you sure you didn't build any peepholes in my Tower?" Omaki whined. "A seaside estate sounds pretty good to me."

The Blondies all laughed at this, and everyone felt a noticeable reduction in the tension that had been building among them since Lord Chi's confession. Both Iason and Raoul felt compensated for the rather egregious violation of privacy they had endured, and among Blondies, compensation was an important concept: to accept compensation meant all grievances were forgiven and the slate was wiped clean. Neither Iason nor Raoul could now bring up Megala's indiscretion, except in the context of friendly teasing.

"Then, there's no actual access into the room?" Odi pressed. "Just a viewing portal?"

"No. The passageway goes by the room. There's only a chair there," he added, blushing.

Raoul paled at this, but said nothing.

"There's no way *inside* the penthouse?" Anders repeated.

"Actually, yes, there is. There's a passageway off the cellar."

"How can you have a cellar in a penthouse?" Xian wondered aloud, having surrendered his prized chair by the fire to witness the unveiling of Megala's secret perversions.

"There's an entire floor beneath the penthouse," Lord Chi explained.

"It's where I keep my wine," Iason added. "So you're saying there's some sort of hidden door down there?"

"Yes. It's behind the far wall: there's a tapestry over it, at least there was when I build the wine cellar. I've never actually used it."

"I'm glad to hear it," Iason replied.

"Does it lead out of the Tower?" Ayuda asked.

"No. Well, not exactly. All the passageways are connected, but the only way to get to them is through *my* suite."

“So, if someone got into your suite, they could have access to any place in the Tower where a passage leads, including the penthouse,” Odi clarified, frowning.

Megala nodded. “Yes, that’s right, although the door in my suite is well hidden, and the penthouse is the only other place in the Tower that actually connects to the passageways.”

“Why did you build a secret door, Megala?” Iason demanded.

“I don’t know. I guess because I *could*. It gave me a sense of power over you.” The Blondie looked shamed at this confession, his head bowed.

“We’ll go down and check it out. You realize we’ll have to post a guard there until we seal off the passageways,” Odi murmured. “And we should have additional security at Megala’s suite.”

“Yes, of course. Hire whatever security you need.”

At that, Odi, Ayuda and Anders rushed off to investigate the hidden door beneath the penthouse.

Iason sighed. “Then, let’s consider this matter closed, and get on with the rest of the evening.”

“I’ll be going then,” Megala said softly.

“Now, now. No sense rushing off,” Raoul objected, throwing an arm around Megala as though they were good friends. “Stay the night. Let’s talk about that estate.”

The Blondie brightened at this, thrilled that Lord Am appeared to have completely forgiven him. “Yes, of course! I have tremendous ideas for it. Actually, I’ve already drawn up a few different designs.”

“Have you now?” Raoul was actually quite pleased with this admission, feeling it showed that Megala had truly regretted his error and had intended to make restitution. Although the Blondie could become quite angry when he felt he’d been wronged, he was also very good about letting a dispute be put to rest, once he’d made a determination the matter was settled. “I hope you thought about fountains. I want several fountains. And a pool. And...a game room.”

“Yes, yes. Whatever you want!”

The Blondies all returned to the great hall, and everyone else made for the east wing to pick out their rooms, having found that Tai had single-handedly cleared the table while they had crowded around

outside Iason's room. The pets and attendants then all left for the Saloon, eager to enjoy some time socializing beyond the watchful eyes of their Masters.

Xian and Heiku both dashed for the blue chair, this time Heiku arriving first. Lord Sami, irritated, sat on top of him. "I'm not moving until you give me this chair," he stated.

"We'll see about that," Heiku replied, whirling his fingers and tickling Xian's ass with them.

The Blondie yelped and jumped up.

"Help yourselves to the bar," Iason offered, moving there to pour himself some wine. "It's fully stocked."

"I guess Heiku won't be having anything," Xian remarked, pouring himself a cognac, "unless he's prepared to give up the chair."

"Yousi," Heiku purred, "would you be ever so kind and bring me some cognac?"

"Of course," Yousi answered, moving to do so.

"No, Yousi! You're not his slave!" Lord Sami protested. "Make him get it himself!"

"Would you two stop already," Omaki scolded. "It's like you're both still eleven."

"Yes," Raoul agreed. "Try to show a little dignity, for Jupiter's sake."

"Say what you will," Lord Quiahtenon replied, crossing his legs. "I'm still not giving up the chair."

The Blondies all settled down by the fire and proceeded to engage in a few minutes of friendly banter.

"Are we going to talk about the logs?" Yousi asked finally.

An uncomfortable hush settled over the room.

"The what?" Megala asked.

"The logs. The ones we were discussing," Yousi repeated. "The ones I think we should burn."

"Yousi," Heiku whispered gently.

"What?" Yousi looked back at him, eyes wide.

"Megala doesn't know about the logs."

Lord Chi frowned, looking at the fire. "The logs are already burning."

“Not *those* logs, the ones about Jupiter. The ones I wrote.”

“Yousi,” Heiku admonished. “Hush, love.”

Megala then seemed to realize something was going on, and further, Yousi’s remark sparked a memory. “You mean the logs that Jupiter punished you for?” he asked in a low, awe-struck voice.

“Why did you tell me to hush?” Yousi protested, frowning. “Aren’t you going to tell him?”

“Oh, hell,” Heiku sighed, closing his eyes.

“We might as well tell him now,” Raoul remarked.

Distressed, Yousi looked around the room. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, Yousi,” Heiku answered. “Never mind.”

“I’m not sure we should discuss this *here*. Perhaps we should adjourn to the Observatory,” Iason suggested.

“Do you really think it makes a difference?” Lord Am countered. “If Jupiter is spying on you, surely she has the entire penthouse under watch.”

Lord Mink considered this, looking uncertain.

“Jupiter’s spying on you?” Megala repeated.

“I’m not sure if that’s true, positively. I only have my suspicions.”

“She’s probably spying on *all* of us,” Heiku added. “If I was Jupiter, that’s what I’d do.”

“You’re probably right. If Jupiter is watching, it doesn’t really matter where we go,” Iason decided.

“Then we shouldn’t talk about it at all,” Xian advised nervously.

Heiku shook his head. “We’ve already put it on the table. Nothing’s happened so far, so I think we’re safe.”

“She could just be waiting to see what we do,” Raoul argued.

“What you do about *what*?” Megala pressed, beside himself with curiosity. “Are you going to let me in on this little secret you all have?”

The Blondies quieted, looking to Iason.

“Very well,” Lord Mink nodded.



VOSKA MADE HIS WAY TO HIS ROOM, FEELING pleased with himself as

he anticipated the night ahead with his new pet. By this time, the robotic plug should have completely opened Azka, and the Commander could take him without causing unacceptable discomfort or pain. It was a rather long process, but one that he felt was necessary; Voshka was rather well-endowed, and he didn't want to do any damage or leave his pet feeling bitter or ill-used after their first night together. He'd learned his lesson with Aranshu and wasn't about to do it again, though, admittedly, the Commander was failing to take into account one critical difference with regard to Aranshu: the Aristian hadn't been bred into pet service, as Azka had been. No, Aranshu had been taken captive. There was little Voshka could have done to win him over, their first night together, because of this. All the same, Voshka remembered the Aristian's bitterness all too well and didn't want such a scenario repeated.

Aranshu had never completely forgiven him for the way he'd been taken the first time. Even when Voshka found himself falling in love with his Aristian captive, he'd never been able to win his heart. When Aranshu had managed to escape, the Commander had been heartbroken. He'd never found his beloved pet, though he had never stopped searching for him. Even just thinking about him made his old sorrow freshen its grip on his soul.

But he had a night of pleasure ahead of him, and he was determined to enjoy it. He forced himself to push back into the depths of his heart the immense darkness that always rose within whenever he thought of his favorite pet. In his life there had only been two individuals he'd ever truly loved, and he'd lost them both: his brother, Anori, and Aranshu.

For the Commander, sex had long since replaced emotional intimacy, and he engaged in coital pursuits with shocking frequency, going from one partner to the next without ever making a true connection. He knew he was gifted in the art of pleasure, and he enjoyed the sex immensely, no question. But in truth, he knew he would give up all his partners without a second thought if only he could have Aranshu back in his arms.

He went into his suite, smiling when saw Azka lying on the bed, asleep. The Amoian pet opened his eyes at his approach.

"I was hoping you would come," he yawned. "I need to...take care of certain things. I keep falling asleep, though."

"It's good that you slept," Voshka replied, allowing his gaze to run up and down Azka's body. "You'll not get much sleep tonight, I'm afraid. I'm quite aroused."

He walked over to the bed, examining the robotic plug, which had shut off. "Ah, yes. You're quite ready for me. Very good." With careful fingers, he delicately removed the device.

"I need to, um," Azka began, hesitantly.

"Go do whatever you need to do, to prepare," Voshka replied smoothly. "There's a little kit for you in the bath hall. Let me know if you have any questions about it. And you'll have your dinner first, before we do anything. Iason's chef is sending it to the room."

"Thank you, Master. I know what to do," Azka replied, pleased that the Commander was so attentive to his needs. This was unusual in a Master, according to Academy teaching. Pets were prepared to be completely ignored by their Masters until they wanted a performance, relying almost entirely on attendants to serve them. But then, Voshka wasn't Amoian, and Azka was rather glad of this fact. Already he liked the man and was quite eager to please him.

After cleaning himself up, Azka found his dinner waiting for him. He sat down at the small table off the kitchenette, eyeing the food hungrily. "This looks amazing," he breathed.

"It's quite delicious," Voshka assured him. "Iason's chef is superb; perhaps I shall have to carry him off with us back to Alpha Zen. Go ahead, I've already eaten."

Smiling at his Master's teasing about kidnapping the chef, Azka proceeded to eat his dinner. "What's it like on Alpha Zen?" he asked, after a few minutes.

The Commander sat down at the table across from him. "You'll like it, I think. I have a very grand palace, although you might find it a bit cold. The winters are quite severe and insufferably long."

"I don't mind. I like snow."

"Then you shall love Alpha Zen, although we have beautiful summers, as well. They're very short, but during that time we have continuous sunlight, warm, pleasant days, and lots of festivals."

"I heard Ultanum is a remarkable city."

"It is, that," Voshka agreed. "A fabulous mixture of old architecture and modern technology."

"They told us at the Academy that you're the ruler of Alpha Zen now. Are you an Emperor, then?"

"In a manner of speaking, though I refuse the title."

"I've heard ever so many stories about you."

"Have you, now?"

"Yes. They told us all about your military campaigns and how you took over the Senate."

"Well, in my view, it's always good to have an ambition."

"Not many men could have accomplished what you did, though," Azka observed. "You must be very clever."

"Or very lucky," Voshka replied, winking. "How is the food?"

"Oh! Delicious! So how did you do it, exactly? Take over the Senate, I mean?"

"I have an army and an air fleet. They're very loyal. With that kind of power behind you, you can take whatever you want."

"*Why* did you do it, then?"

"Strangely, I do believe this is the first time I've heard that question," the Commander replied thoughtfully, "and truthfully, it's hard to explain. Initially, I simply wanted to reward my men and satisfy their appetites. Once you've had a taste of real wealth and its comforts, you find yourself desiring even more. After a time, increasing the size of my military and the scope of my aspirations became...necessary, for the sake of my men as much as myself. I rose to power because I had to."

Voshka chose not to share a more private reason for why he had pursued such ambitions, a reason that was very much wrapped around his obsessive love for Aranshu, who he hoped to entice back into his arms. Unable to win the Aristian's heart through other means, the Commander sought to do so through a grandiose display of wealth and power. In truth, he had secretly hoped his rise to power on Alpha Zen, and his toppling of its Senate, would coax Aranshu out of the shadows. He had fantasized endlessly about how his runaway pet would react to the news, once he learned of Voshka's great

military success.

“Are you going to invade Amoi?” Azka asked this without seeming to have any view on the issue, as though he had simply inquired into whether was planning on sleeping on the right or left side of the bed.

“I have no reason to do that. I have everything I want on Alpha Zen. Besides, this is Iason’s terrain. I rather like him—*all* the Blondies, for that matter. I’d prefer to have them as friends, not enemies.”

Azka nodded. “That’s good. I prefer having friends, too. With enemies you always have to look behind you.”

“Well said. Though I can’t imagine you have too many enemies.”

“Oh, I was rather unpopular at the Academy. The other pets really looked down on me, I’m not even exactly sure why.”

“Jealousy,” Voshka suggested. “They saw in you what I saw—something special.”

“Hmmm.” Azka considered this, imagining how the other pets at the Academy would react when they discovered *he* had been selected by the Commander. “I wish they could see me *now*.”

“Would you like that? We can stop by the Academy before we leave Amoi, and they can all see that I chose *you* over all the others. You can say goodbye to them.”

“Can we?” Azka asked eagerly.

“Of course.”

“I can’t wait!” Azka, though not a particularly vindictive creature, nevertheless had faced significant social ostracism at the Academy, and was looking forward to the chance to show off his good fortune. He reveled in the thought, smiling, and then sighed. “I don’t think I can eat anything else.”

Voshka looked at his plate. “You haven’t eaten half of it.”

“It’s too much. I have a small stomach, I guess. It was very good.”

The Commander rose to his feet. “Well, then. Shall we adjourn to the bed?”

“Let me brush my teeth first.”

“Please do.”

Azka took care of this final important item of grooming, and then returned to the bedroom, finding the Commander already waiting for

him, completely naked and fondling himself.

"You are very handsome," the boy remarked, his cock twitching to life at the mere sight of his Master's naked body.

"As are you. Come, lie with me."

Azka crawled onto the bed, and the Commander pulled him against his body, stroking his hair. "Are you afraid?"

"No. I feel comfortable with you."

"Good. I don't want to hurt you. I want you to be happy with me, Azka."

"I think I will be. You're very nice."

"I will try to be gentle with you, for now. But there may be times when I'm a bit rough. It doesn't mean I'm upset with you, but sometimes I just need to let off a little anger."

"What do you get angry about?"

The Commander sighed. "Oh, there's always something. My position...well, it's rather stressful at times. And, I should tell you right away, there is something I am looking for. Something I lost, years ago. I can't find it, and sometimes I get very upset about it."

"It must have been very special, for you to be so upset," Azka commented. "I lost a favorite earring once. I was so mad! And then I saw Hentu wearing it. He said it was his but I *know* it was mine. That thief!"

Voshka laughed. "I'll buy you earrings that will make you forget all about that one. In fact, you shall have anything you desire, Azka—jewelry, clothing, or whatever other fashionable items you set your eyes on. Just tell me what you want, and I will procure it for you."

Azka became quiet, and Voshka rolled onto his side, looking down at him as he stroked the soft skin of his face. "You're a very pretty boy, Azka."

The Amoian gazed up at him solemnly, his large green eyes bright and shining. "You smell good. And I feel aroused, just being here with you."

"As do I." With that, Voshka began to kiss him, gently coaxing his mouth open with his tongue. They kissed for a long time; the Commander was moving at a very slow pace, determined to make his pet ready for him.

After awhile he broke away, smiling. "That was very good," he said, his voice thick with lust.

"I liked it, too."

"Are you ready to move to the next level?"

"Yes, Master." In fact, Azka was quite eager to proceed: his cock was fully engorged and was glistening with pre-ejaculate, which coated the entire head.

But Voshka continued to explore him in a deliberately unhurried fashion, kissing his neck and sucking on his nipples, first one and then the other, and then back to the first one again. The Commander had full control of their time together, able to prolong the sex as long as was necessary, having learned to master his own arousal perfectly and to think of his partner's needs first.

He rolled onto his back, pulling his pet on top of him and running his hands slowly the length of his body, over his buttocks and between his thighs, all the while continuing to kiss him. Then he placed him back on the bed and moved down between his legs.

"Oh, Master," Azka moaned, beside himself with excitement. "You are so good to me. I should be doing...something."

"Hush. Just relax, and let me pleasure you."

Azka allowed his fingers to tangle loosely in the Commander's soft, dark hair, gasping when Voshka finally reached his erection, his tongue and mouth offering him intimate pleasures beyond his wildest expectations. He found himself almost in tears, so intense was the experience and his happiness at being chosen by someone like Voshka Khosi. Azka had never imagined his life being anything more than an opportunity to serve a Blondie for one or two years, anticipating that he would then be sent to the Midas brothels or an open club to perform indefinitely until, finally, he was sold as a laborer on an outgoing vessel, the inevitable fate of most Amoian pets. Then he would be bound for one of the border planets or perhaps even Galathia, which was every pet's worst nightmare, for the Galathians were said to be not only hideously ugly, but unspeakably cruel.

As he shifted into his ascent and then began to climax, Azka cried out openly, desperately, unable to contain or rework his response into a more scripted, subtle offering. This is exactly what Voshka wanted:

genuine, unrestrained passion, however clumsy or uncontrolled.

For some moments afterwards, the Commander simply gazed at him, enjoying the look of pure rapture on his face.

Azka had been completely transported. He opened his eyes, looking up at his Master in awe. "That was amazing."

"Good. I was hoping you would enjoy it. Do you feel ready for me now?"

"Yes. You don't have to ask me, Master. I am your pet; you can take me whenever you want."

Voshka closed his eyes and let out a tortured sigh at this invitation, visibly trembling now that he had gained his pet's permission to proceed. "Turn onto your stomach."

Azka did so, and the Commander reached for a vial of oil he had placed by the bed, carefully coating his entire length with the warm lubricant, his expression betraying his struggle to keep from ejaculating on the spot. He made a small grunt of pleasure as he took in the sight of his new pet lying so submissively on the bed, ready to be penetrated. "Spread your legs for me, Azka," he instructed softly, drawing in his breath sharply when the boy dutifully opened for him.

Voshka then moved between his legs, pushing his thighs even further apart with his knees. "Stick your ass up in the air for me—that's it! Arch your back as hard as you can! Ah...*very* nice. You're going to be *magnificent*, my pet!" For some minutes he teased Azka with his cock, brushing the tip of it up against his sphincter and then thrusting gently, over and over, though barely penetrating him.

Azka gasped each time the Commander entered him, enjoying the sensation and wanting more. This went on for such a long time that he became aroused again, having not yet entirely spent his built-up lust from consuming the Tarnacsian cider. He squirmed, raising his ass higher in invitation. "Oh, Master!"

"Yes, my pet? Are you ready for more?"

"Yes!"

"Are you ready to be *fucked*, Azka?"

"Yes! Please fuck me!"

Voshka gave him a few more teasing thrusts and then entered him completely, groaning as he did so. Azka accommodated him perfectly,

admitting his full length while gripping him with glorious tenacity.

“Mercy,” he shuddered, pulling out and sinking into him again.

After a few moments of slow exploration and enjoyment of Azka’s little cries of pleasure, uttered so sweetly with his every move, the Commander finally gave into his own needs and fucked the boy without restraint, groaning and straining as he moved toward his goal.

And then he thought of Aranshu. He gave a long, anguished moan, imagining it was actually his beloved pet who lay so submissively positioned for him, rather than Azka. Then, in the next moment, he was climaxing...and weeping.

Azka lay silently, puzzled over his tears. He felt that something terrible must have happened to the Commander for him to suddenly break down at what should have been a deeply satisfying moment. He listened to the man’s weeping, feeling very sad and unsure what to do.

The Academy had not prepared him for something like this.



“GIVE ME ONE OF THOSE,” KATZE DEMANDED, snapping his fingers.

Sighing with mock irritation, Riki surrendered one of his smokes.

“Can I have one?” Kahlan asked, gazing longingly at the pack of Dark Baccalias.

“Sure.”

“Can I try one, too?” Daryl asked.

“No, you may not,” Katze answered.

“I wasn’t asking you. I was asking Riki.”

“And I’m telling you *no*.”

“Why not?” Daryl demanded.

“Because I said so.”

Daryl pouted at this. “Why is it *you* get to smoke then?”

“Because I’m already ruined. I’ll be dead before I’m 50.”

“Don’t say that!”

Katze shrugged. “Probably true.”

“It’s a disgusting habit,” Sarius commented, frowning at Kahlan and wishing the young man didn’t look so sexy when he smoked. “I

don't know why anyone does it."

Kahlan met his gaze, saying nothing, but looking as though he was trying to keep from laughing.

"What are you smiling at?" Sarius demanded.

"Your jealousy," Kahlan replied.

"Don't start with me."

"Why not? Afraid I'll finish you this time?"

"Would you two please stop," Ru pleaded. "I was hoping you'd get along."

"I'm cool," Kahlan shrugged. "He's the one with the problem."

At that moment, Tai and Toma joined them at their table at the Eos Saloon, followed by Yui, who looked rather upset. Yui was, in turn, trailed by Raoul's new pet, though most of the other pets had already wandered off to the game rooms.

"Get me a drink," the pet demanded.

Yui ignored him, sitting down at the table.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

"Fuck off," Yui replied.

The others at the table laughed openly at this, for the expression on the new pet's face was priceless.

"Yui," Katze scolded, though he was struggling hard not to smile.

"What? I'm not going to wait on him."

"I shall tell Lord Am, and he will discipline you," the pet announced. "You are a most unsatisfactory attendant."

"And you're a pain in the ass, Puki."

This brought on more laughter, for various reasons.

"Puki?" Riki repeated. "His name is *Puki*?"

"My Master has not yet named me," the pet retorted, though he looked a bit uncertain on this point.

"He says I can name you, and you look like a *Puki* to me."

"Yui," Katze admonished, this time more sternly, "watch yourself. I'm sure he *will* tell Raoul, and then you'll be in for it."

"Yes, you will. But anyway, I don't need you; I see some old friends. I think I'll go over there and tell them how poorly you've been treating me."

Yui shrugged. "Suit yourself."

The pet turned on his heels, looking extremely indignant.

"Why did you do that?" Katze demanded. "You know he'll tell Raoul."

"I hate him, and I don't care if he tells."

"You *should* care," Sarius remarked. "He could make life very difficult for you."

"He treats me like I'm nothing!"

"Yeah, that's how pets are, Yui. You know that."

"Some of them, anyway," Daryl agreed. "Riki was the first pet who really treated me nice."

Riki blinked. "Awww. Really?"

Ru nodded. "It's true. Pets *can* be very rude."

"Speaking of pets, where's Enyu?" the mongrel asked.

"He stayed behind. I think he's feeling a bit out of sorts, having come into his interval early and all."

Riki looked disappointed at this. "Too bad. I was hoping to have a little fun with him."

"Riki, you're incorrigible," Daryl sighed.

"Why don't you like Enyu, Riki?" Ru asked. "He's actually very sweet, and he's good with Aki, too."

"Cats and mongrels don't get along."

Katze arched a brow. "Someone's jealous, I think."

"What?! I'm not bloody jealous!"

"Sure you are. Although I'll admit, he wasn't very nice to you."

"Thank you for *that*, anyway. He was a complete ass."

Ru shook his head. "He's always been nice to me."

"I think Enyu was jealous of Riki, too," Daryl remarked. "They were both competing for Iason's attention."

Riki snorted at this. "I wasn't competing! He can have him."

"Who can have who?" Sarius asked.

"They can have each other, I don't care."

"You don't mean that," Katze chided. "You're just angry with Iason over what happened this evening."

"And I'm entitled. He treated me like shit!"

Daryl shook his head. "No, Riki. Iason loves you."

"No, he doesn't. You saw how he treated me."

Katze took a deep drag, studying him. "Don't you get it? He wanted to show you off, and instead you rebelled. I thought you were going to be smart, like you were earlier in the day when you came in wearing those chains. Instead you started mouthing off."

"That's what I mean, though, he's never satisfied. He says one thing in the bedroom and then in public he treats me like scum."

"Not like *scum*, Riki," Juthian corrected. "He treats you like a *pet*, because that's what you are."

"None of you understand."

"I think I do," Kahlan interjected. "It would be really hard for me, too, to be someone's pet, when you're used to being on your own, and all."

"Exactly. Thank you." Riki eyed Kahlan with new respect, offering him a slight smile. "So where are you from again? Aristia?"

"Yeah."

"How did you end up here?" Tai asked.

Kahlan sighed. "It's a long story. My family was killed in the Massacre, and so I took a job as a messenger. That's when I met Lord Ghan, I was delivering him a capsule."

"What, and Omaki just took you in?" Riki asked.

"Yeah. He's been really nice to me, I'm not even sure why."

"Master Omaki is a good Blondie," Ru asserted.

"I'm sorry about your family, Kahlan," Tai said softly.

"Me too," Juthian offered.

The others all nodded.

Kahlan stared at his half-empty bottle of stout, his face an expressionless mask. "Thanks."

Riki drained his stout, holding it up for the bartender to see. "Hey! Another round over here!" he called.

The bartender rushed over with a tray of drinks. "Anything else, Riki-sama?" he asked nervously. It was the first time he'd ever waited on Iason Mink's famous pet, and once he'd learned his identity, he'd been going to great lengths to make him feel as welcome as possible.

Riki was eating it up, grinning. "See? This is how a pet *should* be treated," he asserted, after the bartender rushed off to bring him some chips.

“He’s treating you like that because you’re the pet of Iason Mink,” Katze pointed out.

“Toma, are you okay?” Juthian asked, concerned. “You look really stressed out.”

Toma shook his head. “I can’t say.”

“Oh!” Sarius inched his chair closer. “Now we *insist* you tell us.”

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you tell us?” Riki demanded.

“Because...they’d...I don’t know what they’d do.”

“Who is ‘they’?” Katze pressed.

“Master Iason and...the others. The Masters.”

Sarius frowned. “*All* the Masters? What’s going on, Toma?”

All eyes were on Toma, who shook his head, looking frightened.

“No, I can’t tell you!”

“Is there a problem?” Katze asked quietly.

“There might be. I don’t know, I can’t say!”

“Are our Masters in danger?” Ru asked, frowning.

Toma refused to answer, staring down at the table.

“Toma! You *have* to tell us!” Sarius insisted, no longer interested in gossip but legitimately concerned for his Master.

Toma took a deep breath, closing his eyes.

“Please tell us,” Juthian pleaded. “Is something going to happen to Master Xian?”

“They’re...I’m not sure exactly what they’re planning, but they seem to be considering doing something that Jupiter wouldn’t like.”

After a stunned silence, everyone began talking at once.

“What do you mean?” Katze asked. “Like what?”

Toma shook his head. “I only heard part of the conversation. They didn’t even see me come in, they were arguing about it. Masters Raoul and Iason. Iason said something about Jupiter not knowing about the Observatory, because Raoul was worried Jupiter was listening. I heard Master Iason say, ‘You’re not even giving this careful consideration.’ And then Master Raoul said, ‘That’s because I care about you. It’s too dangerous.’ And something else about Yousi, I can’t remember exactly. Then they saw me and seemed very upset that I had heard the conversation.”

For a long moment, no one said anything.

Riki stood up. "I'm going back."

"Agreed," Katze said. "We'd better find out what's going on."

They all jumped up and left the Saloon. The bartender rushed out after them, waving a basket of chips.



MEGALA LOOKED AT IASON IN DISBELIEF. "You're seriously considering this? Turning against Jupiter?"

"Yes."

"I've made my position clear," Raoul stated. "I'm completely against this. It's foolish to even talk about it."

"What do you think, Megala?" Omaki asked quietly.

"I don't think you can do it. Jupiter will find out, and then we'll all be in serious trouble."

"That's my view," Xian nodded.

"But what if we *could*?" Heiku countered.

"What is so wrong with leaving things as they are?" Lord Am demanded. "Jupiter takes care of us. She asks a lot in return, but she made us. She *deserves* our loyalty."

Iason turned to Raoul. "Would you feel the same, if she made you give up Yui?"

The Blondie frowned. "I wouldn't like it. But if Jupiter insisted, I'd have to obey."

"Then you're not with us on this?" Heiku demanded.

"I didn't realize you were *for* it, Heiku," Lord Am retorted. "Sounds as though you've already made up your mind."

"Not necessarily, although I confess I'm leaning towards it, yes."

"I don't think we should proceed without unanimous agreement," Lord Mink asserted. "So it sounds as though we should simply burn the logs."

"Not so fast," Lord Ghan interjected. "I think we should talk about this some more."

At that moment, Odi and Ayuda came into the hall, and the Blondies quieted.

“Did you find the door?” Iason asked.

Odi nodded. “Yes. Anders is keeping guard for now. Master Iason, there’s something else I should tell you; I can’t imagine how I could have failed to do so already, although things have been extraordinarily busy these past few days, and I confess I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“What are you getting at?” Lord Mink pressed, annoyed with Odi’s rambling and anxious to resume their important conversation regarding Jupiter.

Odi held up the residual scanner. “It’s about this. The residual detector. I managed to acquire one and I started a scan earlier, only I was...well, to be honest, I drank the punch, and then,” he paused, embarrassed.

Iason nodded, immediately understanding. “Go on. Did you find something?”

“Yes: around the swimming pool. There was a ring of very strong residual signatures there, surrounding the pool.”

The Blondies all looked puzzled at this.

“Why the pool?” Raoul wondered aloud.

The bodyguard shook his head. “I wanted to tell you about it, I’ll complete the scan now, then?”

“Please do.”

Heiku squinted his eyes, looking concerned. “He’s talking about picking up residuals from some sort of spying device, Iason?”

“Yes. We couldn’t find anything in the penthouse, but we were thinking there might have been a device attached to an individual, or one that had moved, leaving enough transmission particles behind to detect.”

“If he’s saying they’ve picked up residuals, that means there’s a device leaving them behind,” Raoul observed.

At that moment, Riki and the attendants came rushing back into the penthouse.

Lord Mink blanched when he saw the mongrel’s expression. “Is something wrong? Why have you all come back?”

“We want you to stop whatever it is you’re planning. Toma told us.”

"I knew it!" Lord Am exclaimed. "I *knew* we couldn't trust him!"

Katze stepped forward. "Iason, Toma said it was dangerous. Surely you're not thinking of doing something incredibly foolish?"

"I'll tell you one thing," Raoul growled, "I'd sooner proceed than take orders from pets and eunuchs!"

"We're not ordering anyone," Katze replied calmly. "We're just concerned. And remember, what you do affects us, too."

A sudden, high-pitched scream startled everyone. Next, Odi was dragging Enyu into the hall by his hair. "I found it!" He threw Enyu to the floor.

"Found what? How dare you treat my pet so!" Lord Ghan said challengingly, extremely displeased with the way the bodyguard had handled his beloved pet.

"The spy! He's got a broadcaster embedded in his pet ring!"

A stunned silence followed this announcement.

Enyu looked up at the Blondies, wide-eyed. "I didn't know it was there. I didn't!"

"I don't understand. What's a broadcaster?" Riki asked.

"It's a relay device," Odi explained. "It uses existing technology, such as a camera security system already installed, and bounces the information to another location."

The mongrel shook his head. "What does that mean?"

Suddenly it was as though the entire penthouse began to shake. A low hum, Jupiter's signature, began increasing in power and vibration, leaving no doubt that the sentient computer had heard all. The communications center lit up with a red emergency warning light, and an incoming message printed out into Iason's inbox.

The Blondie went over to the box, and with trembling fingers, picked up a summons.

From Jupiter.

13

Jupiter Speaks

LORD MINK STARED AT THE WORDS ON THE SUMMONS and then paled, reaching back to steady himself on his desk.

“Iason, what is it? What does it say?” Raoul asked anxiously.

“We’re finished.” The Blondie closed his eyes, trying to fight off the sudden, severe pain that shot through his head.

“What do you mean?” Heiku stepped forward, pointing to the summons. “What do you have, there?”

Iason shook his head. “This is all my doing. I should be the one being punished. How could I have been so foolish?” The summons slipped from his fingers, floating gently to the floor.

Omaki lunged forward and picked it up, his face betraying his own horror as he scanned the contents.

“Read it! We’re all standing here waiting!” Raoul yelled.

Taking a deep breath, Lord Ghan looked up, nodding. “All right. It’s a summons, from Jupiter:

Disciplinary Summons

Iason Mink

Raoul Am

Omaki Ghan

Xian Sami

Heiku Quiahtenon

Megala Chi

You have all been found to be guilty of serious violations of the General Code, including conspiracy and sedition. Your actions constitute transgressions of a grave nature that require immediate and severe discipline.

With the exception of Jason Mink, you are hereby ordered to remain sequestered in the estate of Jason Mink and are prohibited from leaving the Fos Tower, for any reason, until tomorrow, Moonday, the 8th day of the 11th month at the 13th hour of the mid-day, at which time you will be escorted to the Plaza to be publicly whipped, according to the following sentence:

Xian Sami, FOR VIOLATION OF SECTION X998.5 - 5 STRIKES

Megala Chi, FOR VIOLATION OF SECTION A1048 - 10 STRIKES

Raoul Am, FOR VIOLATION OF SECTIONS PA214 AND X998.5
- 20 STRIKES, REDUCED TO 15

Heiku Quiahtenon, FOR VIOLATION OF SECTIONS C107,
PA214.5, AND X998.5 - 20 STRIKES

Omakei Ghan, FOR VIOLATION OF SECTIONS C107 AND X999 -
25 STRIKES

Jason Mink, FOR VIOLATION OF SECTIONS C107, X999 AND
X999.5 - 60 STRIKES

Jason Mink, you are hereby ordered to report immediately to my chambers, after which you will return to your estate and remain sequestered with the others until your sentence is carried out.

So ordered by Jupiter on this the 457th day of the year 5139.



For a long moment the room was dead silent.

"Sixty?" Riki whispered, feeling the blood drain from his face. Sixty strikes with a whip. That was enough to kill a mongrel. He merely voiced the horror that everyone else felt at the severity of Jupiter's sentence.

Raoul sat back down, burying his face in his hands.

Yousi finally broke the silence, leaning toward Heiku. "I don't understand," he whispered. "What happened?"

"We're being punished," Heiku replied bitterly. "Jupiter was listening, all along."

"Might I remind everyone that this Xeronian is still wearing a broadcaster," Odi remarked.

"Well, remove it!" Xian bellowed.

"It's embedded in his pet ring," Odi replied, aiming his laser at Enyu's ankle.

Enyu stared up at him, horrified. "I didn't know," he whispered meekly.

"I find that hard to believe," the bodyguard retorted. "I should just blow off your entire foot."

"Odi!" Tai hissed, shocked at his lover's sudden cruelty.

"He deserves it!"

"Master?" the Xeronian whimpered, looking toward the Blondie imploringly.

Lord Ghan, who had been standing in a state of shock, stepped forward, frowning. "Come now. You'll not harm my pet. I'll remove the ring." He knelt down and released the ring with his signature, handing it to Odi, who then disarmed the device.

"Jupiter didn't mention anything about our ranks or confiscation of our property," Heiku pointed out.

"Or neurosurgery," Raoul added thoughtfully.

Xian nodded. "That's true. Does that mean we're only to be physically disciplined?"

Omaki turned to Iason. "You'd better go. Jupiter is expecting you."

"What about our pets? What about...." Lord Am's gaze moved to Yui, who was watching the unfolding scene with horror.

Lord Mink looked toward Riki, who gazed back at him, his eyes full of confusion and fear. "I'll find out what I can. I should have known better. And now I've involved all of you."

"Don't try to take all the blame," Omaki answered. "I'm the one who brought you the logs. But *your* punishment is the most severe, Iason."

Raoul shook his head in disbelief. "Sixty strikes. I've never heard of such a thing. My sentence is nothing in comparison."

"I wager you'll feel every one of those fifteen, Raoul," Lord Ghan asserted. "I confess, I'm feeling rather like a schoolboy about to visit Headmaster Konami's chambers." The Blondie was joking in order to hide his private horror, but in fact he was completely stunned at the severity of Jupiter's sentence. Blondies were very rarely publicly whipped, and those that were never endured more than ten lashes, at most.

"Why did Jupiter reduce mine to fifteen?" Raoul wondered.

"Because you were so dead-set against the whole thing, that's my guess," Lord Quiahtenon speculated. "Although I would like to read

the sections of the Code Jupiter claims I've violated."

"Well, it should be obvious enough in your case what the Code refers to: sedition and unsanctioned restoration of a eunuch attendant," Xian answered.

"What's the third violation, then?"

"Iason, have you the General Code somewhere?" Raoul asked.

"Of course. In the library. Daryl, please retrieve the book."

"Yes Master," Daryl murmured, rushing off to find the wanted book.

Sighing, Iason headed toward the door. "I must go."

Katze and Sarius moved aside to let the great Blondie pass, but Riki stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

"Don't go."

"I have no choice, pet," Lord Mink replied, and then, more softly, "but I'll not get much more than a reprimand. Jupiter has already announced my punishment."

The other Blondies exchanged nervous looks at this, wondering if it were really true.

"What if she takes away your...your Syndicate thing? What will happen to you?"

"Then, I'll retire to my villa and live a more comfortable life," the Blondie replied, attempting to smile. He leaned forward to whisper softly in his ear, "Step aside, love. I must face this. I chose to break Jupiter's laws and now I must face the consequences."

Riki darkened, turning to watch Iason as he left the penthouse.

"Jupiter's laws!" he shouted. "Jupiter can bloody suck my cock, the wiry bitch!"

"Riki," Katze reproached sharply.

"I don't care! What if she touches him? What if she makes him, like *that* one?" he pointed wildly to Yousi, furious.

The mongrel, however inappropriately, had just voiced the worst fears of nearly everyone there.

"I don't think so," Lord Ghan replied slowly. "She wouldn't tamper with his mind and then whip him so severely afterwards. He wouldn't understand what was going on."

"That's true," Raoul nodded hopefully.

“But isn’t it odd that she didn’t mention our rank or property?” Heiku pointed out again. “I mean, with Yousi,” he glanced at the Blondie and then lowered his voice, “his punishment was laid out in his summons and she followed it, word for word. Everything was immediately confiscated. So maybe that means we’re only to be whipped?”

“I don’t know if *only* is the appropriate word to use,” Omaki remarked wryly. “Explain to me how any Blondie could endure sixty strikes with a whip?”

Raoul and Riki looked equally worried about this, both of them instinctively turning to Heiku.

“What do you think? Can he survive that?” Lord Am asked anxiously.

Lord Quiahtenon considered it for a moment. “I think so. To be safe, he’ll be forced to ask for Acceleration.”

“Acceleration! That would be pure *torture*!” Raoul exclaimed, and for once, Riki was in complete agreement with him.

“She’s evil,” Riki whispered, his eyes flashing darkly. “How could she be so cruel?”

“Pets, all of you—please retire to your rooms,” Raoul commanded with a dismissive wave of his hand. “We need to discuss this in private without being interrupted.”

“You’re not in charge here,” Riki shot back hotly.

Katze answered that by punching him in the arm. “Hey, back off, Riki.”

“*You* fucking back off! Am I the only who cares what’s going to happen to Iason?”

“We all care what’s going to happen,” Lord Am retorted irritably. “And how *dare* you talk back to me!”

“Riki, come on,” Katze urged, putting a firm hand on his arm. “You heard him, let’s go.”

“Why does *he* think he can come in here and take over?” Riki demanded, trying to squirm away from Katze’s grip. “I have as much a stake in what happens as he does—*more* than he does!”

“Hush!” Katze tightened his grip and then whispered fiercely in his ear, “Hey, knock it off! Sir Raoul is a *Blondie*!”

“Like I really give a fuck! Blondies, Elites, the whole bloody hierarchy—all that means absolutely nothing to me!”

Lord Am stood up, walking towards the mongrel. “You. It’s all because of *you* that this is happening. Before you, Iason would never have dreamed of going against Jupiter! He threw it all away because of you!”

Riki frowned, narrowing his eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“As if you don’t know! You’ve destroyed him! And whatever happens to him, I’m holding *you* responsible,” Raoul finished menacingly.

“Come come, now, Raoul,” Lord Ghan scolded. “No need to start blaming the pets.”

“He *isn’t* a pet. He isn’t even worthy to be a pet! He’s a filthy mongrel, and it’s because of him that Iason has fallen from grace!”

The mongrel stared back at him coldly. “You’re just jealous. You’re jealous because he loves *me*, and not you.”

“Bastard!” Raoul, now in a rage, started for Riki but was stopped by Heiku and Omaki, who both leapt forward to restrain him.

“That’s enough,” Heiku admonished sharply. “Jupiter’s sake, Raoul, leave the pet alone. Sarius! Help move Riki out of here.”

“You too, Ru,” Lord Ghan ordered.

“You’re insane,” Lord Am spat, struggling against the two Blondies as Katze, in concert with Sarius and Ru, forced Riki out of the hall. “He can’t possibly love you.” Though Iason had already confessed his love for Riki to him, Raoul still refused to believe it could be true.

Toma and Tai lingered behind uncertainly.

“Shall I bring the tea tray?” Tai asked, trying to restore a sense of normalcy to the room.

“Please do,” Omaki nodded. “Bring coffee, as well. We won’t be sleeping much tonight.”

Riki turned to look back over his shoulder, scowling. “You’re such an asshole, Raoul.”

“Mongrel! Scalawag! I hold you responsible!”

“Scalawag?” the mongrel laughed at this last jibe, even as he was escorted from the great hall.

“Goodness, Raoul,” Heiku snapped, “get control of yourself. He’s hardly worth losing your composure over.”

“Quite right,” Lord Ghan nodded. “It’s time you got past this.”

“But it’s *his* fault!”

“Come, sit down,” Lord Quiahtenon soothed. “You’re upset, like the rest of us. But surely, you can’t blame Iason’s funny little pet for all this?”

“I *do* blame him,” Raoul replied, his voice shaking with emotion. “I tried to warn Iason so many times. He wouldn’t listen!”

“You’re blinded by your own feelings,” Lord Sami remarked gently. “You’re blaming the pet, but it’s hardly his fault Iason was so taken with him, is it?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Why are you so upset?” Heiku interjected. “You have Yui, very nicely restored—at great personal sacrifice, I might add.”

At this, Raoul quieted, his fury dissipating a bit. He sat down, burying his face in his hands with a great sigh. “What’s going to happen to him?”

“He’s going to be publicly whipped,” Yousi answered, studying the summons. “And so are you and...everyone except me.”

Lord Am shook his head. “His reputation will be ruined. How can he keep his position?”

“Perhaps he can’t,” Omaki agreed. “For that matter, all of our reputations are ruined.”

“What about this one?” Odi asked, pointing to Enyu, who still sat huddled on the floor in terror.

“Enyu, go find Aki, and then bring him to me,” Omaki ordered.

“Yes, Master.” Enyu rose to his feet and then rushed out of the great hall.

“You’re not going to punish him?” Odi demanded.

Lord Ghan, who was typically slow to anger, had finally had enough. “I beg your pardon? Are you addressing me, Guard?”

Odi immediately assumed a look of contrition, bowing slightly. “Forgive me, Lord Ghan.”

“Perhaps you can find something useful to do, rather than continue to badger my pet?”

"Of course. Excuse me." Flushing red at the reprimand, the bodyguard quickly left the hall.

"What precisely is a scalawag, I wonder?" Heiku mused. "Some type of fish?"

"I found them," Enyu announced, rushing almost immediately back into the room. "They were just down the hall."

"Why were you all yelling?" Aki asked, as he and Suuki followed the Xeronian. "Is it a game?"

Omaki sighed, closing his eyes. "Come here, little love."

"We captured all the butterflies," Aki reported, as he walked over to the Blondie.

"Only, one got smashed," Suuki added sadly. "His wing was broken and now he can't fly."

Lord Ghan sat down by the fire, pulling Aki onto his lap and putting his arms around him.

"You're holding too tight," the boy whimpered.

Suuki frowned, looking around at the solemn faces of the Blondies. "Is something wrong?"

"Sir Elusiaux is here," Askel announced over the intercom, as the main door to the penthouse hummed open.

"I don't want to go!" Suuki yelled.

"Suuki. You've been here *quite* long enough. You mustn't outstay your welcome. Come, it's late."

The Elite stopped in his tracks, startled when the X900 Guardian spun in front of him to scan his retina.

"Don't mind that, it's only a security device," Omaki explained. "It's just checking your retinal identification against the database."

"Good evening, Sir Elusiaux," the Guardian announced, before whizzing off to a corner of the room.

"My," the Elite whispered, impressed with the technology, though feeling a bit violated by it.

"It's not late! I'm not even tired yet," Suuki protested.

"Did you hear me? Mind me, Suuki." The Elite seemed nervous, his gaze flitting from one Blondie to another. "Is Iason not here?"

"He's...gone on an urgent errand," Lord Ghan replied.

"I see."

Resigned to his going-home fate, Suuki then happily described the delights of Aki's Guardianship Party. "We had so much fun! We drank silly punch and then we ran around naked, which was Aki's idea, and after that there were lots of party games, and all the Blondies were naked, too, and making funny noises, but we didn't get to go swimming because that naked pet was chasing Aki, and then Commander Khosi told us we can put our *Aprentage Ships* on Alpha Zen as long as we are naked part of the time, and then we fell asleep, and then we found out about the secret passageways and the butterflies all got free, but we captured them all except for, this one, that got his wing broke, and *then* there was...an *earthquake*!"

Elusiaux stiffened at this animated summary of how his precious charge had spent the evening, trying unsuccessfully to smile and blinking every time Suuki uttered the word "naked," which by his reckoning occurred far too many times for his comfort. He hardly knew what to make of Suuki's description of the party, but he had heard enough rumors about both Iason Mink and Omaki Ghan to believe they *might* be true, and he could not help but notice that none of the Blondies even attempted to correct the boy's story.

"Yes, I...that is, we felt some sort of tremor, as well. There's some talk it was Jupiter?"

Heiku and Omaki exchanged looks, though remained silent.

"Yes, Jupiter was very angry," Yousi confirmed.

"Hmmm." The Elite waited for a moment, but when no answers were forthcoming, he pulled Suuki a little closer to him. "We'll be going, then."

"Can he come back to play tomorrow?" Aki asked.

"We shall see."

Suuki looked disappointed with this answer. "That means no," he clarified.

"Why not?" Aki demanded.

"Aki," Lord Ghan scolded, "settle down. You don't address an Elite in that fashion."

Elusiaux visibly relaxed at the reprimand. "Perhaps...Aki could come and visit Suuki tomorrow?"

"Can I?" Aki screamed.

"Hush." Omaki gave the boy a little shake. "No screaming," he said firmly. Then he looked at Elusiaux, nodding. "It's up to Iason, but I imagine he'll allow it."

"Then, I'll send Suuki over to fetch him in the evening."

"Actually, would it be much trouble for you, if he were to come over earlier in the day? Tomorrow is going to be a rather...difficult day for us because, well, forgive me, I'd rather not get into details, though I daresay you'll find out soon enough."

Sir Elusiaux gave him a puzzled look. "Certainly—Aki may come over any time. Late morning, then?"

"Yes, that would be perfect. Unless you hear from Iason otherwise, let's plan on that."

The boys were delighted over the prospect of a second day together, and as soon as Suuki left, Aki leapt from Omaki's lap and rushed over to the table, rummaging through his presents.

"What should I take tomorrow?" he asked breathlessly.

"Aki, go with Enyu now and pick out a room. Then you can take all your presents and put them away in your new room and then pack your day-bag for tomorrow. But I want you to stay there, *in your new room*, until I come for you, because we are having an important meeting, and I don't want you to interrupt us."

"Yes, Master!" Aki rushed off with Enyu, thrilled with the prospect of picking out his new room.

"You might as well have told Elusiaux," Lord Sami remarked. "By tomorrow everyone on Amoi will know."

Omaki shrugged. "Why should that fall on us? Let's just let it unfold."

"At least *you're* not being punished again, Yousi," Heiku sighed.

"I'm not on the list," Yousi agreed nervously. "Do you think she forgot me?"

"No, love. Jupiter didn't forget you. She knows you didn't do anything wrong."

"But...I sent the logs."

"You've already been punished for the logs." The Blondie reached over and tugged on Yousi's tunic. "Stop fretting. Sit down."

Yousi found a chair and sat down, though he continued to frown.

“Twenty strikes is too many, Heiku,” he said sadly. If there was one thing the Blondie still understood, it was discipline, and exactly how much could be endured. Twenty lashes with a whip—if administered full strength by a Blondie—was almost unthinkable. Unable to focus on anything other than Heiku’s punishment, Yousi did not even comment on what was in store for Omaki and Iason.

Heiku nodded glumly. “I know. I’ll survive it, though.”

“You are all so brave,” Lord Chi said softly. “I must admit, I’m terrified about my ten strikes. I feel I may be sick, just contemplating it.”

Xian nodded. “I feel the same. I feel foolish for saying so, when I’m only at five.”

“I daresay neither of you will enjoy your punishment, any more than we will,” Lord Ghan replied. “And I confess, I nearly wet myself, when I read the summons.”

Heiku shook his head. “What a way to spoil a good party.”

“Right. It’s all fun and games until someone gets publicly whipped,” Omaki quipped.

This remark elicited a few smiles, though no one felt much like laughing.

Tai and Toma rolled the tea tray into the room and began distributing drinks and various sweets to the Blondies.

“Ah! Are those Yurenian truffles?” Megala asked, noticing the tray of desserts.

“Yes, Lord Chi. Would you like some?”

“Please. Three. No, four.”

“Go ahead, take the whole tray, Chi-chi,” Omaki teased.

Megala blushed, instinctively clearing his throat.

The Blondies all groaned.

“Sorry,” Sir Megala murmured.

“Some krevlians, Lord Am?” Tai offered gently, knowing full well the delectable frosting-filled confections were his favorite. He had contacted the households of the all the Blondie Masters to determine exactly which sweets they enjoyed best, prior to the party.

Raoul, though continuing to frown, nodded his acceptance, and, selecting an especially large krevlian, bit into it with a sigh.

"Oh dear. You've brought pecan rolls," Heiku noticed.

"Yes, Lord Quiahtenon. Would you like some?"

"I would indeed."

"I'll have those cookies," Yousi announced, having spied a plate of frosted biscuits that were, of course, selected especially for him.

"And Lord Ghan? Some cherry cheesecake for you?"

Omaki smiled, realizing that Ru must have alerted the chef as to his favorite dessert. "I happen to adore cherry cheesecake."

"I claim that frozen cream sundae," Xian said, quite loudly.

Heiku rolled his eyes. "What are you yelling for? Idiot. We all have our favorite desserts. That one's obviously for you."

"I still claim it, all the same."

"But," Megala protested, after swallowing an especially delicious mouthful of truffle, "I wasn't invited. How did you know this was my favorite?"

Tai smiled. "I called your House. Nomi told me."

"Did you tell him what is going on?"

"Of course not, Lord Chi. That is, I might have suggested you would be staying the night. He wanted to know if he should come to attend you."

"Oh. Yes, please have him come. And tell him to bring my...bag. The green one. No! The *blue* one."

"Your bag?" Omaki teased. "Did you forget your purse, Chi-chi?"

Megala blushed. "It's for my personals. My intimates."

"Your," Heiku struggled not to laugh, "your *intimates*?"

The Blondies, except for Raoul, all snickered at Megala's term for his personal hygiene products, and at the idea of his having a known "bag" for them.

"What was in the *green* bag, Megala?" Lord Sami teased.

"Yes, Chi-chi? Why blue and not green?" Omaki pressed.

"He keeps his spyglass in the blue one," Heiku suggested, leaning close to Lord Ghan.

"I don't see how you all can be merry and gallivanting about at a time like this," Raoul grumbled.

"Gallivanting? Doesn't that involve movement?" Heiku challenged.

"Quite right. We're all just sitting here. No gallivanting

whatsoever,” Lord Ghan nodded.

“Have you forgotten we’re all to be publicly whipped tomorrow?”

“What?!” Omaki exclaimed. “Heavens! That *did* slip my mind.”

Heiku snorted at this, as did Xian, who suddenly began laughing so hard he started coughing.

“I don’t see how you can find *any* of this amusing,” Lord Am muttered, frowning.

“Me either,” Lord Chi agreed, looking extremely apprehensive.

Daryl finally approached the Blondies, holding the General Code. “I found it,” he said meekly.

“Ah. I’ll take that,” Heiku instructed, holding out his hand.

Daryl handed him the book, wondering where Katze and the others had gone. “Can I bring you anything else?”

“No,” Raoul answered. “Go to your quarters until we call you.”

“Yes, Lord Am,” Daryl replied, bowing and then rushing out of the hall.

“Yousi! Give me that summons.” Heiku snapped his fingers impatiently.

Yousi handed it to him, and the Blondie began thumbing through the book. “Let’s see. C107. Ah! Here it is: ‘C107. INDEPENDENT CHANNELS. No Amoian shall be in possession of an Independent communication device of any kind.’ What?! We’re being punished for that?”

“Only you, me and Iason,” Omaki clarified, looking at the summons.

“Xian has one, too!” Heiku protested.

Lord Sami rolled his eyes. “Well, just announce it to everyone! Maybe you should yell it out the window in case Jupiter didn’t hear!”

“What’s X998.5? Most of us have that, except Megala,” Lord Ghan prompted.

“Here it is. ‘X998.5: FAILURE TO REPORT. Any Amoian, having knowledge of seditious plans or conspiracies to overthrow the supreme authority of Jupiter, shall report this information immediately.’ And here’s X999: ‘ACTS OF SEDITION. No Amoian shall encourage seditious acts or plot a rebellion against the supreme authority of Jupiter, or shall knowingly conspire with others to violate

any law of the General Code.”

“A1048,” Megala urged anxiously.

“That’s all the way at the beginning,” Heiku muttered, flipping the book back to the opening pages. “Yes, here it is. ‘A1048: ARCHITECTURAL SECURITY. Every building constructed on Amoi shall have the correct blueprints filed in Jupiter’s mainframe, and failure to provide accurate architectural schematics or the deliberate misrepresentation of any public or private structure shall be considered a serious breach of architectural security.’”

“I can guess what PA214 and PA214.5 are,” Raoul remarked.

Heiku nodded, taking a moment to locate these entries. “PA214. PET ADMINISTRATION: UNSANCTIONED RESTORATION. No Amoian shall solicit the sexual restoration of a eunuch servant without Jupiter’s explicit approval.’ And PA214.5, ‘PET ADMINISTRATION: PERFORMANCE OF UNSANCTIONED RESTORATION. No Amoian shall perform medical procedures designed to sexually restore a eunuch servant without Jupiter’s explicit approval.’”

“Does that mean if we ask, Jupiter might *give* approval?” Xian wondered.

Heiku rolled his eyes. “Not likely.”

“I think that’s all of them,” Omaki murmured.

“What about X999.5? Iason has that one,” Raoul asked.

“It’s the last law in the book,” Heiku observed. “The Syndicate Law.”

“Read it,” Lord Am sighed. “You know perfectly well I never had the patience to learn the General Code.”

“X999.5: THE SYNDICATE LAW. The Head of the Syndicate shall be Jupiter’s counsel and is required to report any knowledge of crimes against Amoi and Jupiter; he shall obey all laws and at all times uphold conduct befitting the leader of Tanagura, and as such shall be exalted and enjoy Jupiter’s protections. If he fails in his duties he shall fall from Jupiter’s grace.”

The Blondies were quiet for some moments, reflecting on this last line.



FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE BECOMING HEAD of the Syndicate, Iason actually trembled uncontrollably as he approached Jupiter's sanctum. He could tell by her high-pitched hum and orange-red aura that she was furious. He entered and then, hoping only for mercy, knelt down before her, his head bowed with shame.

Jupiter did not speak, at first. She watched Iason humble himself before her with a mixture of sadness and suspicion, no longer sure if she could trust him, her Iason, the Syndicate Head who above all others, she had loved the most.

"Forgive me," he pleaded, unable to meet her gaze.

"Do you know how much you have disappointed me, Iason?" Jupiter replied.

"I take full responsibility," Iason answered, daring to look up at her. "Do what you will to me. But the others do not deserve to be punished so severely."

"I have already determined their punishments, and yours."

"What of their titles, and their estates? And...they wanted me to ask you, what will happen to their households?"

"I should strip you—all of you—of everything you have, and turn you all into mindless sex drones. But to remove the six of you from your offices and powers would throw Amoi into chaos. Your influence and importance extends too far, and the sudden loss of your services and leadership would be too disruptive. So I have opted to punish through physical means. Your humiliation and pain will show Amoi that I will not tolerate disobedience, and that I will make no exceptions to my laws. Not even for you."

Lord Mink lowered his gaze. "You are most gracious; we do not deserve your clemency," he murmured. "But I must ask you. About...my pet?"

"You will surrender him at the end of the year, as we already discussed. But I will make one concession: give him up *now*, show your obedience to my will, and I will cut your punishment in half. Thirty strikes."

"Please," Iason whispered, "I know I do not deserve it. But I'm asking you—no, I'm *begging* you—let me keep Riki."

“Have I not made myself clear on this point? Then you will not give him up now?”

The Blondie bowed his head, closing his eyes. “I cannot.”

“You can, but you *choose* not to. You choose to defy me, even now.”

“You misunderstand me, Jupiter,” Lord Mink protested, standing up to face the sentient computer. “It is not my wish or intent to defy you. But I love Riki. I cannot give him up—not now, and not in a year.”

Jupiter’s hum increased in volume and pitch as she reflected on his answer. “Then you may return home and face your punishment tomorrow. And if you refuse to surrender your pet at the end of one year, you will face my full wrath, Iason.”

The Blondie frowned at this, but offered Jupiter one final bow before he left, heartbroken.



“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, BACK THERE?” Katze demanded, as soon as they left the great hall.

“What? *He’s* the one being an ass, and you know it!” Riki retorted.

“He’s still a Blondie, Riki,” Juthian said gently. “And he’s upset. Didn’t you hear? He’s going to be punished, too.”

“They’re *all* going to be punished,” Sarius added grimly. He was worried about his Master, and in that, he wasn’t alone.

Yui was practically in tears. “This can’t be happening. This is my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Yui,” Ru argued. “Your Master chose to restore you, even though he knew it was against Jupiter’s law.”

“That’s right,” Katze agreed. “They made their choices, knowing what the consequences would be if they were caught. Unfortunately for them, Jupiter found them out.”

“Of *course* she found them out,” Riki replied bitterly. “Are they all complete idiots? Have they forgotten about the rebellion at Dana Burn? I could have told Iason as much, if he had trusted me with his plans.”

"It is odd that they would even consider such a thing," Katze agreed. "They really underestimated Jupiter."

"Perhaps they've grown too comfortable?" Ru suggested.

"Yes," Sarius nodded. "That's exactly it. They're accustomed to everything going their way. They've taken for granted what Jupiter's given them."

By some sort of unspoken consensus, the pets and attendants had all stayed together, gravitating toward Riki's suite, and now they all gathered around in the seating area there.

"What's going to happen to us?" Juthian asked.

"I'm not sure," Katze admitted. "I suppose it depends on whether Jupiter intends to confiscate their assets. If that happens, I hate to say it, but...well, everything will change, for all of you."

As the group reflected on the horror of this possibility, Ru attempted to lighten the mood. "Well, no sense in worrying about it until we know what's going to happen. And, if I recall, when Sir Yousi was disciplined, Jupiter allowed him to keep his entire household?"

"That's true," Sarius remembered. "In fact, didn't Yousi hire an additional servant?"

"He had to," Ru nodded. "He needed more assistance... afterwards."

At this, the group all fell silent.

"Do you think Jupiter will do the same thing to our Masters?" Yui asked finally.

"If she does, I'll personally stick a chain-bomb up her mainframe and blow her to Gardan," Riki muttered.

"And the rest of us with her," Katze remarked wryly.

"I'd just as soon die if that happened to my Master," Yui proclaimed.

"So would I," Juthian agreed.

"Well I don't know about *that*," Sarius murmured, "but I confess, I hope I don't get thrown off to some horrid Master like Elusius Puck."

The others nodded agreement at this, having heard stories of the Blondie's notorious cruelty to members of his household. Some of them immediately thought of Daryl, who had first-hand knowledge of Lord Puck's barbarity.

“What did Raoul mean when he said I’d destroyed Iason?” Riki asked, frowning. “He said it was my fault.”

There was brief silence.

“It’s not your fault, Riki,” Juthian soothed.

“But what did he mean?”

“I don’t know about you, but I could use a smoke,” Katze murmured. “I know Iason doesn’t allow smoking inside the penthouse but, given the circumstances, I don’t much care about his rules at this point.”

“I agree.” Riki retrieved a pack of Dark Baccalias from his jacket pocket. “Want one?”

“Thanks,” Katze nodded.

Riki held the pack out to Kahlan, who took one also. As the three of them lit up, the others settled down on the comfortable grouping of chairs and sofas, while Ru headed toward Riki’s bar.

“I could use a drink. Anyone else?”

“I’ll take a scotch,” Katze answered.

“Brandy, for me,” Sarius added.

Kahlan nodded. “Brandy sounds good.”

“I’ll have...I’ll have a cognac,” Yui announced, having never consumed any sort of alcohol before and so simply picking his Master’s favorite drink.

“Riki?” Ru prompted.

“Stout.”

“You mean to tell me, you have a fully-stocked bar and you’re still drinking that piss-water?” Katze demanded.

The mongrel shrugged. “I tried the other stuff. I just like stout. I’ve been drinking it since I could spit.”

Katze shook his head. “Whatever.”

“So, what did Raoul mean?”

“Surely you have *some* idea?” the eunuch prompted.

“Not really.”

“Well, you’re a mongrel. Jupiter never approved of Iason taking you as a pet. I know for a fact he was reprimanded for it, at least once. But Iason insisted on keeping you—and you’ve been here nearly three years now.”

“So?”

“So, Jupiter doesn’t like it. Iason is the Head of the Syndicate—he should be showing off a new pet at least every year, the way he once did. Instead, he rejected all the Academy pets—the very ones he puts up for auction—and picked you instead, and then kept you far longer than he should have.”

Daryl, who had been listening from the open door, having just arrived after finally locating the General Code for the Blondies, nodded. “It’s more than that. Iason *takes* you, Riki. That’s forbidden.”

Yui and Juthian exchanged uncomfortable looks.

“Forbidden? Is it written in that...Code book thing?”

Daryl shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think it’s more of an... understanding, or an unwritten law.”

“A social taboo,” Sarius clarified.

“But it really isn’t fair that Raoul blames you,” Ru pointed out. “I think you’re right—he’s jealous. Everyone knows he’s still in love with Iason.”

Yui bristled at this, his eyes flashing angrily. Ru, realizing his error, blushed.

“He *doesn’t* love him,” Riki countered. “If he did, he’d care about Iason’s happiness. Raoul only wants him because he can’t have him.”

“Do you think so, Riki?” Yui asked hopefully.

“Yeah. I know they’re old pairing partners and that stuff never really goes away completely, but I think Raoul just wants to control Iason. He can’t deal with Iason rejecting him for someone else—me, especially.”

“That’s probably pretty accurate,” Katze agreed. “Although he was devastated when Iason broke things off, years ago. But it was really Raoul’s fault.” Suddenly realizing he was giving more information than necessary, the eunuch quieted.

“How was it my Master’s fault?” Yui demanded.

Katze shrugged. “I don’t know the details,” he hedged, rather dishonestly, “but apparently he paired with someone else. Iason was so disgusted over the whole thing he cut things off completely.”

Riki nodded, catching Katze’s eye, and the two of them shared a knowing look.

Ru then distributed their drinks and the room was quiet for a few moments.

"You should be relieved, Yui," Katze smiled, trying to turn the conversation. "Raoul will be so distracted over all this, perhaps you'll escape being punished over the Puki incident."

The others laughed, especially at the name "Puki," which for some reason struck them all as particularly funny.

Yui relaxed a little, returning the smile.

"I can just see him now, coming into the penthouse all puffed up and indignant," Sarius laughed, straightening up to imitate the proud little pet. "Master Raoul! My attendant is most unsatisfactory! He refused to kiss my ass!"

This elicited more snorts and giggles.

Katze held his hand out to Daryl, pulling him onto his lap. "How are they reacting to all this?" he asked, in a low voice.

"They were actually...laughing, about something."

"Really? That's good. They've calmed down, then."

"Am I crashing the party?" Odi asked, leaning against the doorframe to Riki's room.

Riki motioned him in, nodding towards the bar. "Make yourself a drink."

"Don't mind if I do."

"Odi, were you really going to shoot off Enyu's foot?" Ru demanded, frowning.

The bodyguard shrugged. "I felt like it."

"That's horrible!"

"It's because of him all this is happening now."

"That's not true. I don't think he even knew about the broadcaster!"

"That's your view," Odi replied.

"I agree with Ru," Kahlan protested. "Enyu seems like a decent fellow, despite being a Xeronian."

Ru turned to Kahlan. "What does that mean? You don't like Xeronians?"

"I only meant...when they're in their rut, they'll shag anything that moves. They claim later it's not rape because they couldn't help

themselves.”

Ru fell silent, studying him for a moment. “I see.”

Kahlan shrugged. “But I mean, Enyu seemed pretty nice.”

“He didn’t know,” Riki remarked thoughtfully.

Katze arched a brow in surprise. “Oh, really? Don’t tell me you’re standing up for catboy?”

“No. It’s just that I don’t think he knew. He was a mean little bastard to *me*, but I don’t think he would want to hurt Iason.”

“Or Master Omaki,” Ru agreed. “He loves our Master, I’m sure of it.”

“Perhaps I’m mistaken,” Odi conceded. “All I know is, the moment we found that broadcaster, the shit really hit the fan.”

Now a small yellow light above Riki’s door lit up, alerting everyone that the Master of the House had returned.

Riki jumped up, darting out of the room before anyone could stop him.

In the great hall, Iason’s entrance was greeted with relief by the Blondies.

“Iason!” Raoul stood up, approaching him with worry in his eyes. “What happened?”

Lord Mink tried to smile, but his headache was now so severe he had trouble even standing.

“What is it? Are you ill? What did she do to you?”

The Blondie shook his head. “Just a little headache, Raoul.”

Heiku looked concerned. “Are you still having those, Iason?”

Toma, taking in the situation, immediately rushed to the pharmacy cabinet in the hall to retrieve some analgesics for him, his identification allowing him to bypass the automatic lock.

Riki passed him, his eyes narrowing when he saw Toma at the pharmacy cabinet.

“Another headache,” Toma whispered.

Nodding, the mongrel dashed into the great hall, ignoring Raoul, who glowered at him.

“Come on,” he soothed, taking hold of Iason’s arm. “Let’s get those muscles rubbed out.”

“What did Jupiter say?” Omaki asked.

“Did you find out anything about our assets?” Heiku pressed.

“Leave him alone, all of you,” Riki snapped. “Can’t you see he’s in agony?”

Lord Mink allowed his pet to guide him to a chair, seeming glad for his attention. The Blondies, though not particularly happy about being dictated to by the mongrel, realized that he spoke the truth, and they watched silently, feeling a bit foolish for not taking the initiative to help Iason’s suffering.

“Here,” Toma whispered, handing Riki an O-6 and a glass of water.

“Have you taken anything for this yet?” Riki asked.

Iason shook his head.

“Then, take this.”

Iason did so, but rejected the rest of the water. “Some wine, Riki.”

“You can’t have any,” the mongrel said firmly. “Not with that O-6.”

“He’s right about that, Iason. You mustn’t consume alcohol until that opiate is out of your system,” Lord Quiahtenon stated, impressed that Riki had the wits to know about the interaction, and the courage to challenge Iason’s authority, to ensure the Blondie would not come to any harm. Although Heiku expected, in general, unquestioning obedience when it came to pets and attendants, this was one situation where he saw Riki’s rebellious nature in a more favorable light. It was clear enough to him, as well as to the others standing there, that the mongrel had his Master’s best interests in mind.

Much as he might have wanted a glass of wine, Iason was in no position to argue with anyone, even his own pet. Of all the headaches he’d endured since the Agatha poisoning, this was by far the worst. Riki began rubbing out his shoulders, which the Blondie seemed to respond well to, judging by his low moans and gasps.

“I can do that,” Lord Am offered jealously. “Iason, shall I rub your shoulders for you?”

“No, Raoul. Let Riki do it.”

Though there was a hint of a smile at his lips, Riki had, amazingly, the good sense not to openly gloat over Lord Mink’s rejection of Raoul’s offer, keeping his gaze carefully lowered. He bent down to whisper into the Blondie’s ear, “Let’s go into the bedroom. All right?”

We should do this right, with the lights out.”

Nodding, Iason rose and allowed his pet to guide him to the Master bedroom.

“Forgive me,” he murmured, as he passed the Blondies.

“No no,” Heiku protested. “Go lay down. That’s precisely what you need.”

“Perhaps we should all retire,” Omaki suggested. “I could use a good massage myself.”

The others nodded their agreement, and so the party broke up.



IASON SIGHED, FINALLY IN A STATE of almost complete relaxation, his headache gone and all his tense muscles worked out by Riki’s skillful, healing touch.

“Feeling better?” the mongrel whispered, crawling onto the bed next to the Blondie, who was lying facedown.

“Yes, love. I feel perfect.”

“Good.” Riki lay quietly, not wanting to disturb Iason’s hard-won tranquility.

Lord Mink opened his eyes, rolling over onto his back. “Come here, Riki,” he commanded softly.

The mongrel snuggled up to him, and for a long time they simply lay together, enjoying the comfort of the embrace.

“Iason, is it true, that it’s because of me all this has happened?”

“Who told you that?”

“Raoul.”

The Blondie sighed. “I shouldn’t say this, but I want you to ignore whatever Raoul said to you. I’m afraid he’s rather jealous of you and wants to hurt you.”

“But is it true?”

“No. What’s at issue is my defiance and my disloyalty. I wanted to bring Jupiter down.”

“But why? Because of me?”

“Hush.” Lord Mink pushed Riki onto his back and then bent down to kiss him. The mongrel returned his kiss and then broke away.

“But is it?”

“Don’t concern yourself with such matters.”

Riki scowled. “How can you tell me not to be concerned, when you’re about to be publicly whipped? I want to know if it’s because of me!”

“Naughty pet,” the Blondie scolded, even as he was kissing Riki’s neck. “What did I just tell you?”

“Stop treating me like a child! Why won’t you answer me?”

“You are still my pet, Riki. As such, you will submit to my decisions, and I have decided we are not going to discuss this matter any further.

The mongrel gave a great sigh of exasperation. “You’re impossible! I hate when you do this, when you shut me out.”

“Riki,” Iason sighed, moving up onto his elbow and stroking his cheek with his other hand. “Enough of this. I want to make love to you now. Get undressed.”

“Why should I? If you’re going to treat me like a *naughty pet* instead of the man that I am, then perhaps I’ll resist you.”

“Then,” Lord Mink traced a finger along the mongrel’s jaw line before tilting his chin up, “perhaps I shall punish you.”

“Ha! You—”

Riki was silenced when the Blondie’s mouth came down over his, hard. Iason had never kissed him in such a fashion before, brutally, passionately, bruising him with his force. He struggled only for a moment before submitting and encouraging him, engaging Iason’s demanding tongue with his own. Then, it was as though a floodgate was opened, the passion each of them privately held for the other breaking loose in honest abandon. They rolled around on the bed, exploring each other with wild, almost frantic caresses.

Not since before Riki had run away had they loved each other in such a fashion. The sex they had enjoyed during the party had been mostly carnal: just pure lust-induced fucking, their bodies responding to the aphrodisiac coursing through their blood. This was something entirely different. This was lovemaking fueled by the passion stored up in their hearts, expressed now with a sense of urgency almost bordering on desperation. They both knew this would be the last

night in a long while that they would be together.

It seemed, suddenly, that they had much to say to each other, much that had been left unsaid, until then.

"I'm sorry I ran away," Riki gasped, as Iason kissed his throat. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Oh, Riki," the Blondie moaned. "You *did* hurt me, very much."

"I know. And I'm sorry."

"Promise me you'll never do that I again."

"I won't. I already told you I wouldn't," the mongrel replied, with uncharacteristic gentleness, his dark eyes shining with affection.

"You mean everything to me."

"But you're risking too much. What's going to happen when—"

"Shhhh." Iason silenced him with a kiss. "Let's not talk about what's going to happen. Just love me now, Riki."

They shared another long, intimate kiss.

"I'm sorry I was such an ass, earlier," Riki whispered.

"I should not have been so hard on you."

"It's all right. I know you were just hoping to show me off."

"I loved when you came to me wearing your chains today," Lord Mink declared. "That pleased me so very much."

"Yes, I know. You told me," the mongrel replied, seeming rather pleased with himself. "I knew you would. I really liked the note you left me, did I mention that? It was awesome going to the Saloon today, too. Thanks for letting me go."

"I want you to be happy with me, Riki."

"I am, most of the time. Now, anyway." Riki closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle kisses the Blondie pressed all over his face.

Iason then kissed him on the mouth as he fumbled with the zipper on his pants. He managed to unfasten him, and then slipped a hand around the mongrel's already engorged manhood. "Get undressed," he whispered, in between kisses.

Riki gasped, his moan lost in the Blondie's kiss. He reached down, attempting to push his pants from his hips. Iason assisted him in this project, tugging off the tight-fitting pants as Riki doffed his tank, tossing it onto the floor.

Lord Mink paused for a moment, taking in the mongrel's beautiful,

naked body. Riki sat up on one elbow, fondling himself with his other hand, his legs slightly spread apart. The Blondie knelt over him, running both hands down his thighs and then up to his groin, and then across his hips.

Riki lay back down, his eyes smoldering with lust.

“Spread your legs,” Iason demanded, and then, wetting a finger in his mouth, prepared the mongrel for entry.

Breathing harder, Riki closed his eyes, holding his erection in one hand. “Please, Iason,” he panted.

“Yes? What do you want, my pet?”

“I want your mouth...on my cock.”

The Blondie obliged him, moving down between his legs and pleasuring him, all the while continuing to move his finger seductively inside the mongrel.

Gasping, Riki finally placed his hand on Iason’s head to stay him. “I don’t want to come. I want to wait.”

Lord Mink raised his head, his eyes gleaming. “You want me to stop? Don’t you want me to drink you, my love?”

“I want to try and come...when you’re inside me, this time.”

“Very well,” the Blondie replied, withdrawing his finger. “But first, I want a taste of you.” With deliberate drama, he spread the mongrel’s legs apart, pushing his thighs back to access his portal. Then he swirled his tongue around Riki’s sphincter a few times before wiggling up inside him.

“Oh fuck,” Riki gasped. “Fuck *yes*.” His groaned and arched his back, but once again placed a restraining hand on the Blondie’s head. “Stop now. I’m too close.”

Iason rose up, so aroused that his erection stood out rigidly from his body. Without a word, he repositioned himself, straddling Riki’s chest as he thrust his cock eagerly toward the mongrel’s mouth.

“That’s it, my pet. Very nice,” he breathed, when Riki obediently began to pleasure him. He leaned forward, hands on either side of Riki’s head, and thrust gently into his mouth, gritting his teeth all the while.

Bringing himself just to the gates of his ascent, Iason switched positions again, taking a moment to lubricate himself with some of

the oil Riki had been using to massage out his muscles. Then he spread the mongrel's legs open with his knees, probing his entrance with his swollen member before finally slithering inside him.

Riki opened for him, accepting him completely.

"Magnificent," Iason moaned. He withdrew almost to the point of exit, and then slowly arched in again.

Riki, with uncharacteristic boldness, spread the Blondie's ass with his hands, kneading his flesh for a few minutes before squeezing a finger inside him.

"Iason," he said, his breathing now coming in gasps, "I don't want you to be punished. I don't want you to be hurt...because of me."

"Hush, love," the Blondie whispered, suddenly breaking into his ascent. He allowed his body to ride his lust, thrusting eagerly as he approached the culmination of his pleasure. "Ohhhh! Pet, you undo me! Oh, Riki, Riki!"

The mongrel cried out just as enthusiastically if a little less eloquently, "Oh, fuck! Fuck, yes—here it comes!"

Both of them climaxed at precisely the same moment, united in their rapture, each marveling in the sex cries of the other.



AKI WANDERED INTO THE KITCHEN, SURPRISING Tai, who startled upon seeing the boy.

"Oh! Aki. Can I get you something?"

"Master says I can have a drink before bed."

"I see. Water, then?"

"Can I have peach juice?"

"What did your Master...that is, Sir Omaki, say you could have?"

"Water," Aki replied glumly.

Tai smiled. "Then I think that is what you should have."

"All right." The boy took the glass of water and then went back into the great hall, just as Riki crept out of the Master bedroom.

"I'm going to bed," Aki announced.

"Oh. That's...nice."

"Where is Guardian?"

“He’s...asleep. He wasn’t feeling well.”

“Master isn’t feeling well either. Everyone is sick, I guess.”

Riki shrugged. “I guess.” He moved over next to the fire, settling down in Iason’s chair.

“Master usually tells me a story before bed,” Aki hinted.

Riki blinked. “Does he, now?”

“Yes. Can I sit on your lap?”

“Um...why?”

“Master always lets me sit on his lap,” Aki answered, walking over to Riki and climbing onto his lap without waiting for further invitation.

“Well, that’s because your Master is a big pervert,” Riki mumbled. “*Ahh!* You just spilled water on me!”

“Sorry. Here.” Aki handed him the glass of water and the mongrel took it, frowning, and then set it on the table next to him.

Aki made himself comfortable, snuggling back against him. “Tell me a story,” he demanded.

“I don’t know any stories.”

“Tell me about you, then. When you were younger.”

“Well,” Riki paused, considering. “I guess I could tell you about... when I was the leader of Bison.”

“What’s Bison?”

“It’s a gang, in Ceres, the slums where I grew up.”

“That sounds good,” Aki encouraged, settling back into his arms. “You were the leader?”

Riki smiled. “Yes. I was...well some people called me the *Prince* of Midas.”

“Prince! So that means everyone did whatever you said?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Riki closed his eyes, remembering. “Everywhere I went, people would practically bow down. I had all the mongrels kissing my feet.”

“Why would they do that?” Aki wondered, perplexed.

“I don’t mean *actually* kissing my feet, like with their lips or anything. It’s an expression. It means everyone...well, they respected me.”

“Oh. And,” Aki suddenly yawned widely, “then what sort of things

did you do?”

“Oh, we were always doing something. We liked to play jokes on the Elites and race our bikes, play billiards and just hang out at the beach. Other times we, well...I guess I shouldn't tell you this.”

“Tell me what?” the boy asked eagerly, immediately wide awake.

“We would do, I suppose you could say...*naughty* things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we had to steal in order to survive. So we were always in trouble with the Police.”

“Would they chase you?”

“Shit yeah. But we'd get away, most of the time.”

“But not always, then.”

“Not always. And it really sucked when we *did* get caught. Those Midas Police are mean fuckers.”

“This is a good story,” Aki announced. “But what happened? How come you're not the Prince of Midas anymore?”

Riki was quiet, brooding over his question.

“How did you become Guardian's pet?” Aki pressed.

“Aki.” Lord Ghan walked into the great hall, looking annoyed. “I told you to get a drink and then come right to bed.”

“Riki is telling me a story,” Aki protested.

“Yes, I heard. Now mind me. Off to bed, *now*.”

Pouting, Aki slid off Riki's lap, turning to give him a parting smile.

“Thanks for telling me a story.”

“Sure,” Riki answered.

“Will you tell me the rest sometime?”

“If you like.” The mongrel smiled at the boy, reaching out to pat his head. “Have good dreams, kid.”

“Okay.”

Aki followed Omaki out of the hall, and Riki sat for a moment, staring at the fire. Telling Aki about his life as the leader of Bison had depressed him, and he struggled with his feelings. Riki the Dark, the slum lord of Ceres, was gone, his life nothing more now than a legend. Riki realized, now with complete certainty, that he would never return to Midas.

Guy pressed into his thoughts, and then, though he tried hard to

repress it, Kei. He had done his best not to think about what had happened that day at Dana Burn, but he realized that he had to do something about it. Guy was probably still frantically looking for Kei.

He glanced over at the communications center, his gaze shifting to the drawer where Iason kept various punishment implements and other things. He had a hunch Kei's handheld was in the drawer. The penthouse was quiet, all the Blondies having retired to their private quarters, and Iason was still asleep.

Realizing his opportunity, Riki crept over to the communicators center and popped open the drawer. There, among the various paddles and straps, he found what he was looking for: Kei's handheld phone. He seized it, quietly shutting the drawer and then stepping out onto the balcony.

The night was cold and windy. The mongrel shivered, lighting up a smoke to at least warm his hands. He flipped open the phone. The screen was blinking with hundreds of missed calls, but the device appeared to be set to mute. He cycled through Kei's contacts until he found the single word he hoped for: Guy.

Shaking a bit, both from the cold and his anxiety, he placed the outgoing relay, surprised when Guy immediately picked up.

"Kei? *Kei!* Is that you?"

"No," Riki replied. "It's not Kei."

There was a slight pause. Then, "Riki?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Kei? Why are you using his handheld?"

"Kei's gone, Guy."

"Gone where? Where is he? Riki!"

"I'm sorry. It was an accident. I wanted to call you before. But I couldn't."

"What are you saying?" Guy's voice shook with emotion, his worst fears suddenly realized. "Let me talk to him!"

"You can't talk to him. He's gone."

"Where is he?" Guy shouted.

"His body...is in the sea," Riki answered. "I'll send you his pendant. I'm sorry, Guy. Goodbye."

"Riki!"

The mongrel cut the connection, and then, after considering it for a moment, threw the phone over the ledge. He turned around, just as Iason came out onto the balcony, wearing his heavy, silk-lined robe.

"It's too cold outside, Riki," he scolded. "Come inside."

"Yeah, all right. I was just finishing my smoke."

"I heard you talking to someone."

"Talking? Oh...no, I was...I was just...um...composing a poem. About the night."

The Blondie smiled. "A poem? Let me hear it."

Riki shook his head. "No, it's stupid."

Lord Mink moved behind him, wrapping his arms around him. "Tell me, pet."

Glad for the great Blondie's warmth, Riki relaxed back against him. "Well, okay. The poem. It's silly. Um, it's:

Night

Crystal specs of light

Pierce the moonless sky

Unable to warm my soul

The cold penetrates and bites

Like a cock up a virgin's hole."

At this, Iason threw his head back and laughed.

"I told you it was stupid," Riki shrugged.

"You shall always be a mongrel," Lord Mink replied tenderly, kissing his temple.

"Yeah, well. You like me that way."

"Come inside now, I told you. It's cold."

"All right," Riki replied, tossing his smoke over the ledge.

"Riki, how many times have I told you *not* to throw your smokes over the ledge! Jupiter's sake, that's what this ashtray is for," the Blondie scolded, pointing to the decorative vase in the corner of the balcony.

"Sorry, I always forget."

"You had better hope that cigarette went out before it hit the ground," Iason grumbled. "You could set someone's hair on fire."

“That’d be pretty cool,” the mongrel said with a grin, imagining some Blondie’s hair caught on fire from his cigarette butt.

“It would be anything but that,” Lord Mink replied, giving him a disapproving look. “And I assure you, I’d be the first to hear about it. You’re the only one vulgar enough to do such a thing.”

The mongrel kept quiet, glad that Iason hadn’t caught him throwing the handheld over the ledge, and wishing that he had thought twice before doing so. He wasn’t worried so much about the possibility of someone being struck by the phone down below as he was the Blondie’s reaction when he discovered the handheld was missing. He would have some explaining to do, and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

He sighed, realizing then that he would probably always be hiding some form of mischief or wrongdoing from Iason, hoping he wouldn’t get caught. He didn’t especially care for this thought, nor for the almost absolute certainty that, despite the love the Blondie professed to have for him, he wouldn’t hesitate to punish him whenever he deemed it necessary.

But what else could he really expect? He was Iason’s pet. That reality was never going to be any different. No matter how intimate things became beneath the sheets, it wouldn’t change the one central, unvarying truth about their relationship: Lord Mink was his Master, and thus would always have authority over him.

“I want you in bed with me. I can’t sleep, when you’re not there.”

“What did you do, before I came along?”

“I didn’t sleep,” Iason confessed, smiling.

“Hmmm. Sounds like you *need* me, then.”

“Yes. I need you, pet. Very much.” The Blondie shut his eyes, his arms wrapped tightly around him, just as Ios peeked over the horizon, beginning his ascent into the night sky.



MOONDAY DAWNED COLD BUT CLEAR, the sky a pale shade of blue. Tai had stayed up half the night cooking the morning meal, determined that, at the very least, the day would begin pleasantly, and with a good

breakfast. The dining table was laid out festively, a variety of dishes steaming under covered domes, surrounded by wreaths of pine branches and Amoian holly.

The Blondies wearily made their way into the great hall, one after the other, all of the them gravitating to the breakfast table.

"I don't think I slept a wink," Heiku groaned, holding out his coffee cup when Tai rushed toward him to fill it.

"Nor I," Raoul replied.

"You didn't sleep," Yousi observed, looking at Heiku, "because you kept wanting to have sex."

Lord Sami snorted at this, but Heiku only shrugged. "Can I help it? I finally had you back in my bed."

"I slept," Omaki remarked. "Though I had a horrible dream I was going to be publicly whipped."

"I fail to see the humor," Lord Am growled, when the other Blondies all laughed at this.

"The food looks good, anyway," Xian remarked, and everyone nodded their agreement.

"Have you any tea?" Megala asked, smearing a generous dollop of honey onto a breakfast roll.

"Yes, Lord Chi. Right away." Tai brought the Blondie an entire teapot, setting it down within his easy reach.

Lord Mink emerged from the bath hall, having showered and dressed in one of his finest outfits, as though he were prepared to attend a formal party.

"Iason," Heiku announced, between bites of a cheese-smothered bacon and spinach omelet, "I'll give you twenty five million credits for your chef."

"Fifty million," Xian challenged.

"You don't have fifty million," Lord Quiahtenon retorted.

"I beg your pardon! Since when are you privy to my personal finances?"

"I'll give you sixty million, then."

Iason smiled. "Forgive me, but I am not prepared to part with Tai at this time."

"It's not fair," Heiku protested. "You have the best chef on Amoi."

You ought to at least loan him out to us.”

Tai beamed at this praise, taking it as an affirmation that his efforts had not gone to waste.

“Did you sleep, Iason?” Raoul asked, clearly concerned.

“Yes, quite well, actually.”

“Hmmm.” Lord Am was actually surprised to hear this, since he knew how lightly his former lover slept. “Must have been the pharmaceuticals.”

Iason refrained from contradicting him, sitting down at the breakfast table as though nothing extraordinary was about to happen.

“So, your headache is gone?” Heiku pressed.

“Yes, yes. I’m quite all right, this morning.”

“Then, perhaps you’ll tell us now what Jupiter said?” Raoul hinted.

“We’re all very lucky,” Iason replied. “We’re to keep our titles and our estates, *and* our households.”

This announcement was greeted with sighs of relief and smiles.

“However, the whippings will proceed, as scheduled.”

Lord Ghan nodded, though he had privately hoped the charismatic Blondie might have been able to work some of his magic on Jupiter to lighten their sentences.

“Even *yours*, Iason?” Raoul whispered. He, too, had nourished the hope that Iason might have somehow persuaded Jupiter to reduce his punishment.

“Jupiter offered to reduce my strikes to thirty,” Iason confessed, avoiding eye contact with Raoul, “but I could not give her what she asked for.”

Lord Am darkened at this, his anger already rising. “And why not? What is it she asked for, that you couldn’t give?”

“Jupiter asked that I give up Riki.”

Raoul pounded the table with his fist. “Dammit, Iason! Why didn’t you agree?”

Lord Mink met his gaze. “Because I love Riki. I’d sooner give up part of my body, than give him up.”

The Blondie leapt to his feet, furious. “That’s exactly what you’ll be giving! You’ll be lucky to survive this, Iason! I’ve held that whip a thousand times myself! Even thirty strikes would be agony—and

you're going to take sixty! It's unspeakable!"

"You might want to reconsider," Heiku pressed gently. "You'll have to give him up eventually, anyway. Isn't that right?"

"I'll deal with that day when it comes. Raoul, sit down."

"You don't know what you're saying. You'll be halfway through your punishment, begging for mercy, and Jupiter won't give it to you."

"I'm sorry to intrude," Commander Khosi said, as he made his way into the hall. "I see you're having a private conversation of some importance, but I confess I'm quite famished, and this food looks absolutely splendid."

"You're not intruding, Vosh. Please, sit down. Raoul, you too. *Please*," Iason replied.

Lord Am reluctantly took his seat, scowling.

The Commander studied the Blondies, his gaze flitting from one to the next. Although he had been tempted the previous day to intervene when he heard yelling in the great hall, he had decided that, as a guest, it was more appropriate that he should stay in his quarters and let the Blondies work out their differences. He had been curious as to the nature of their disagreement, but it was not until now, having overheard part of their conversation, that he had any idea as to what they were arguing about.

He sat down, holding up his cup for Tai to fill with coffee.

"I couldn't help but overhear," he began, delicately. "Are you in some sort of trouble, Iason?"

The Blondie sighed, nodding. "We're all in trouble, Commander. We...this is rather embarrassing to confess, but in fact, we had been toying with the possibility of removing Jupiter from power. But, as fate would have it, Jupiter learned of our plans. We're to be punished today."

Voshka listened, frowning. "Punished?"

"Publicly whipped."

"My. How barbaric."

Omaki nodded. "Agreed."

"We're all slated for whippings, but Iason is to take sixty strikes," Heiku added.

The Commander was astonished at this sentence, his brow furrowing with concern. “*Sixty*, Iason? Surely not?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“That’s quite severe,” Voshka murmured, thinking for a moment. “I could offer you asylum, if you like? On Alpha Zen? We can leave immediately.”

The Blondies all looked at one another as the implications of this offer sunk in.

“We’d have to leave Amoi permanently,” Heiku mused.

“As for myself, I’m not going to run away from my punishment,” Raoul announced proudly.

“That’s easy for *you* to say. You’re not facing twenty-five or *sixty* strikes,” Omaki remarked.

Raoul blushed, realizing he had spoken out of turn. “Point taken.”

Lord Mink felt tempted by the Commander’s offer. He would be beyond Jupiter’s reach, assured of having Riki with him. But like Raoul, he didn’t like the idea of shirking his punishment. He felt, as Head of the Syndicate, that he ought to face whatever Jupiter had in store for him.

“Your planet is too bloody cold for me,” Xian proclaimed, shivering at the thought.

“What about you, Iason?” Voshka asked softly.

“Your offer is much appreciated, Vosh. But I can’t leave now. I have...an obligation. I’ll take my punishment.”

A bit disappointed, yet secretly admiring the Blondie for his resolve, the Commander nodded. “Understood. The offer still stands, should you change your mind.”

“I’ll be staying, as well,” Lord Ghan decided. He had privately hoped Iason might take the Commander up on his offer; it would have been easier, then, to accept the offer as well, and leave Amoi, taking Aki with him.

“As will I,” Heiku sighed.

Voshka turned to the one Blondie who hadn’t weighed in. “Megala?”

Lord Chi looked startled at being directly addressed. “Oh! No, I... have too much unfinished business, Commander,” he explained.

"I don't want to go to another planet," Yousi stated. "It would be too confusing."

Heiku leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You're not going anywhere without me, anyway."

"I have to go *some* places without you," Yousi observed. "Private places, I mean."

"That is true. I see I shall have to make some exceptions."

"Megala! Can I borrow your bag?" Lord Sami teased. "I left mine at home."

"What in tarnation is that noise?" Raoul demanded, looking toward the window.

"I've been wondering that myself," Heiku said.

Toma rushed over to the window and then stopped, stunned. "Oh, my."

"What is it?" Iason demanded.

"It's...traffic."

"Traffic?"

The Blondies stared at one another in confusion.

"And...hovercrafts. And crowds of people, down below the Tower."

"Oh hell," Heiku groaned. "It's started."

In fact, Tanagura was in a state of chaos. The scheduled Public Whippings of the six renowned Blondies had been announced on Jupiter's news portals the evening before, and throughout the night the traffic had steadily increased, as scores of curious onlookers from Midas and Urus poured into the grand metropolis of the Elites. The Tanagura Police had sent out its entire force, including aircraft, to try and stem the steady migration into the city. But already the streets were completely gridlocked, and the area around the Plaza, where the whippings were to take place, was completely blocked off by a legion of the Amoian Guard.

Unable to get into the Plaza to view the whippings, crowds had resorted to standing outside the Eos Tower, hoping to at least catch a glimpse of the Blondies as they were escorted to their fates.

"It's a circus," Raoul muttered bitterly. "And this is Moonday at the opening of the Trade Convention. Half the people will be in costumes for the masque."

“Well, at least we’re famous,” Heiku asserted, with a wry smile.

“*Infamous*, more precisely,” Omaki corrected.

“It’s part of the punishment,” Iason said softly. “Jupiter wants us to be humiliated.”

“Hey! Why didn’t you wake me up?” Riki demanded, sauntering into the hall, dressed only in a pair of unzipped pants.

“Riki,” Iason scolded. “That’s hardly appropriate attire to be wearing in front of our important guests.”

“Hmmm?” Riki stretched, arching his back and showing off his fabulous chest and arms, which he kept nicely sculpted through a daily regimen of pushups and chest presses.

“Quite appropriate, in *my* view,” Voshka countered, winking at the mongrel.

“The others are waiting for you in the breakfast nook, Riki,” Tai whispered.

The mongrel frowned, raising one brow suspiciously. “The breakfast nook? Where the fuck is that?”

Tai pointed toward the rarely used room down the hallway, next to the Library.

“Why can’t I eat right here?”

“Because you’re not an Elite,” Lord Am snapped. “Do you see any mongrels at the table? And I quite agree with Iason. You can’t waltz around half-naked. It’s highly disrespectful.”

“Waltzing. And gallivanting,” Heiku teased, eliciting a series of snickers and snorts from Xian.

“And *scalawaging*,” Lord Ghan added.

“I must concur with the good Blondie,” Voshka purred. “I much prefer pets walking around *completely* naked.”

Riki looked around him, his brow furrowed. “What’s that noise?”

“It’s the sound of a thousand vultures, come to feed on the dead,” Omaki replied.

“Huh?”

“Riki, come here and give us a kiss.”

“What?!” the mongrel protested. “I’m not kissing *all* of you! Not Raoul, anyway!”

“Thank heavens for that,” Lord Am remarked.

The Blondies were all laughing. Riki looked insulted, putting his hands on his hips. "What's so funny?"

"Riki," Iason laughed, "come here. I meant for you to give *me* a kiss."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Riki moved to the Blondie's side, leaned forward and dutifully pecked him on his cheek.

"Now, get dressed and go eat your breakfast with the others," Lord Mink instructed, giving him a warning look.

"Whatever." The mongrel shrugged, leaving the great hall.

Anders, who had been standing by the wall, watching the Blondies through uninterested eyes, at that moment received an incoming relay on his communicator. He flipped it open, reading the message with a mixture of surprise and excitement.

"Commander." He stepped forward, whispering into Voshka's ear.

The Commander suddenly stood up, the blood rushing from his face. "Gentlemen. I fear I must make a sudden departure. I have just received some news which requires urgent action."

"I hope everything is all right, Commander?" Iason asked, looking genuinely concerned.

"Yes. I believe so. Only, I must leave at once. Please forgive me. And...ah...Iason. About the Trade Convention. Alpha Zen considers Amoi to be her preferred trading partner. All former exchange is to be fully restored."

Lord Mink rewarded him with a warm smile. "Very good. Jupiter will be pleased about that, at any rate."

"You're leaving just like that?" Omaki asked, looking disappointed.

"Yes, I do apologize. I realize this is an awkward time for you. I should be here but, it's just, I've learned there's been an uprising on Aristia, and the matter is of some personal interest to me."

"Are you quite sure?" Iason asked. "We would have received some sort of news from Aristia, surely."

"Actually, I heard about that uprising myself, the other day, Iason," Xian remarked. "There was a massacre at the palace at Arubia."

"Perhaps you should check your communications relay, Iason," Heiku suggested. "I received that message, too."

“How very odd.” Iason raised his eyebrows, shaking his head.

Tai watched the unfolding scene nervously, backing away from the table as discreetly as he could.

“I must say, it has truly been a pleasure. Iason,” Voshka gave the Blondie a little bow, his gaze then shifting to Omaki. “Lord Ghan.”

“A pleasure, indeed,” Omaki smiled.

“And as for the rest of you, my offer still stands. Alpha Zen will always be a refuge for you.” Bowing again, the Commander turned sharply on his heels and strode from the hall, with Anders at his side.

Heiku puzzled over the Commander’s hasty exit. “Why does he care what happens on Aristia?”

“Wasn’t there another massacre on Aristia? Years ago?” Omaki remembered.

“Yes, there was,” Lord Mink confirmed. “It must have something to do with that. My understanding is the Commander’s men were responsible for it.”

A loud explosion startled everyone.

“Good gracious! What was that?” Lord Ghan exclaimed.

Heiku pointed to the window. “Fireworks, it seems.”

Omaki looked incredulous. “At 8:00 in the morning?”

“They’re treating this like some kind of festival,” Raoul grumbled.

“Iason, about those pills you took last night. Have you any others?” Heiku asked.

“Yes, I have plenty.”

“Good. Let me have a look at your pharmacy, and I’ll see what I can come up with. It won’t have much effect after a certain point, but we might at least be able to take the edge off things. We should have everything ready; it’s going to be a rough couple of days for all of us, especially you.”

Lord Mink rose from the table. “Good idea. I’ll show you.”



RIKI ARRIVED AT THE BREAKFAST NOOK, standing in the doorway with a confused look on his face.

“I thought this was a closet,” he murmured.

Daryl smiled. "Master Iason never uses this room now, but he did when I first came to the penthouse."

Katze nodded. "I spent many a lonely meal here myself."

"The view is nice," Riki remarked, walking toward the window. "But what the hell is going on down there? And were those fireworks I heard? And look! Hover-birds!"

"They've been coming in all night long," Sarius replied. "Didn't you hear the traffic?"

"No. I just woke up."

"Apparently the summons was broadcast late yesterday evening, and the whole city just turned upside down. I heard on the Channel that the Police have blocked off all the roads flowing into Tanagura, but they can't seem to stop people from getting in via bikes or hovercraft. They were swarming in last night from Midas but now they're coming in all the way from Urus."

"You mean to see the Blondies get whipped?"

"Precisely. Traffic has come to a complete standstill in the city and the Police have called in reinforcements from Midas to control the pickpockets and looters."

"I wish this day was over," Juthian groaned.

"Me too," Yui agreed. "Every time I think about it I get sick."

Riki sat down at the table, loading his plate with eggs, bacon and hotcakes, saying nothing.

"It's going to be horrible," Ru murmured, shuddering.

"Yes, it will be hell for them," Katze conceded, "but they'll get through it."

Katze, Daryl, and Juthian exchanged knowing looks, each of them having some idea as to what the Blondies were facing.

"Here's the thing," Katze continued. "They're going to need us, the next few days. For Iason and Omaki, and perhaps for Heiku, it may be longer. Afterwards I think we should bring them all back here, and that way we can work together to take care of them."

The others all nodded their agreement to this plan.

"Good idea," Ru remarked.

"So, Riki. Your appetite doesn't seem to be spoiled any," Kahlan said, laughing.

Riki shrugged. "Yeah, I never turn down a good meal."

"Is that so?" Katze smiled. "I seem to remember you had a different view, when you first came to Eos."

The mongrel blinked, and then smiled sheepishly, remembering his three-day hunger strike when he was first brought into Iason's penthouse. "That was a long time ago."

"Not so long," Katze replied softly.

Ru stood up. "I'll help clear these plates."

"I'll help, too," Kahlan offered.

Riki covered his plate with his hands protectively. "I just started, here."

Juthian turned to Yui, who was staring down at his lap, blinking back tears. "Have you seen the gardens here, Yui? They're quite spectacular."

Yui shook his head.

"Come on, I'll show you."

"I'm going, too," Sarius announced.

"I'd better go see if the Blondies need anything," Daryl said, rising.

"You're all deserting me!" Riki protested.

"I'll stay with you," Katze replied. "I'm too bloody tired to move."

Once the others had left, Riki turned to Katze. "I wanted to ask you a favor, anyway."

"Oh? Go ahead and ask. No promises, though."

"Asshole!"

"Wait. First you call me an asshole, and then you expect me to do a favor for you?"

"I was just teasing."

"I know," Katze replied, winking.

Riki leaned toward him, lowering his voice. "Actually, this is important. I need you to run an errand for me. To...return something." He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out Kei's pendant, handing it to him. "Can you return it? To Guy?"

Katze looked at the pendant in his hand, frowning. "You've kept a love token all this time?"

Riki shook his head. "It's not what you think. But...it's important. He needs it."

“All right. I don’t know when I’ll have a chance—I imagine I’ll be over at the convention center all week. With Iason and Raoul both out of commission for the next few days, I’ll have a lot of matters to attend to.”

“Okay. As soon as you can though, please?”

“Sure,” Katze answered, shoving the pendant into his jacket pocket.



THE PLAZA WAS PACKED WITH BYSTANDERS. Most of them were Elites, though a few non-Elites had managed to claim a space in the early hours of the morning. Amoian Guardsmen surrounded the Plaza, preventing anyone else from entering the overcrowded square in front of the Emporium.

At the fringes of the spectacle, vendors took advantage of the crowds and set up stands to distribute food, drinks, sparklers, balloons, holo-cameras, and—the most popular item of all—zoom binoculars. It was Moonday, at the opening of the Amoian Intergalactic Trade Convention, just five hours before the Annual Masque, which was to be held at the Emporium. People came to the Public Whipping already in costume, determined to include the punishment of the Blondie Elites in their planned festivities for the day. Their elaborate, glittering costumes and masks gave the scene a surreal quality, as though the scheduled whippings were part of some grand, absurd play.

A tent had been set up for the privacy of the Blondies, a concession that was granted them out of respect. A second dispensation given them was that the Blondies, unlike pets who were whipped, were not subjected to the humiliation of complete nudity. They were stripped to the waist, but wore loose-fitting, silken pants and knee-high boots.

The Blondie that had been summoned to administer the whippings was Xanthus Kahn, known throughout Amoi for his incredible strength. He was the most feared of any Blondie when it came to public whippings, revered even more than Lord Am, who was a second favorite among those who enjoyed such spectacles. But today,

Raoul would not be the one holding a whip.

Xanthus paced the stage, cracking his whip as he readied himself for the task he faced. It would challenge even his strength and endurance, to whip six Blondies. He would administer a total of 135 strikes. In all his days as a disciplinarian, he had never even whipped another Blondie, and now he was to punish six of the most highly regarded Elites in Amoian society.

The Blondie had pushed his personal feelings aside when summoned by Jupiter for the task, for, in truth, he had nothing but the highest respect for Iason and Raoul, and for Xian—who he even considered to be a friend. And though he and Heiku had never warmed to one another, he certainly did not wish him harm, nor did he want to see the great Blondie suffer, as he knew he most certainly would. The other Blondies, Megala and Omaki, he knew by reputation alone, though they had all gone to the Academy together.

Upon receiving word of the disciplinary summons, Xanthus, like many others that day, had been shocked to learn of the conspiracy and the planned revolt against Jupiter. He would never have imagined that Iason Mink, who had enjoyed Jupiter's favor more than any other Blondie, would repay that favor with subversion and seditious rebellion. And yet Xanthus also understood that Iason had fallen in love with his pet. In that, he and the disgraced Blondie were not so dissimilar, for Xanthus, too, secretly loved his own pet Golarian.

But whatever reason had driven Lord Mink and the others to turn against Jupiter, it was now his duty to see that they were punished. He would not hold back; they would feel the full force of his arm, though privately the Blondie was worried especially about what was in store for Iason, and how he could possibly endure what was coming.

Lord Sami was the first to be escorted onto the stage. For a moment, their gazes locked and Xanthus thought he saw his old friend flinch upon recognizing him. His heart went out to Xian, and he was glad that the Blondie was only to endure five strikes.

Xian was manacled to the whipping post, his arms and legs spread, while Xanthus paced behind him, reciting in his mind the sentence he

had memorized.

The crowd, which earlier had been deafening, now fell completely silent, the hush somehow even louder than the previous clamor had been.

At precisely the thirteenth hour, Xanthus stopped pacing behind Lord Sami, hands on his hips.

“Xian Sami,” he announced loudly, “you have been found in violation of Section X998.5 of the General Code. You have been sentenced to five strikes with this whip, and you will now receive that punishment. You have the option of Acceleration. Do you choose Acceleration, or reject it?”

“I accept,” Xian replied.

“Very well.” With that, the Blondie paced for a few more seconds, and then threw back his arm and let the whip fly with a deafening crack, hitting the Blondie full-force across his back.

“One!” The strikes were announced by Kobin Nu, a Blondie with a particularly deep, menacing voice, who stood at the back of the stage, arms across his chest.

Xian’s hands closed into fists as he fought the overwhelming pain of the whip. Before he could fully recover, the second strike sliced into his skin.

“Two!”

On strike three his eyes rolled back, and on strikes four and five, he could no longer hold back, his agonized cries breaking through the silence.

His sentence carried out, Lord Sami was released from his bonds and assisted back into the tent.

Next came Megala Chi, the smallest of the Blondies, who cringed when he beheld Xanthus Kahn, blood dripping from his whip. He was manacled to the whipping post as Lord Kahn again paced the stage behind him.

“Megala Chi,” Xanthus bellowed, “you have been found in violation of Section A1048 of the General Code. You have been sentenced to ten strikes with this whip, and you will now receive that punishment. You have the option of Acceleration. Do you choose Acceleration, or reject it?”

“Reject,” Megala replied meekly.

“Very well.”

Unlike Lord Sami, Megala was unable to hold back at all, crying out from the very first strike. Blood streamed from the whip gashes in his back; it seemed an interminable amount of time before all ten strikes were delivered. At the last strike, Megala let out an agonized scream that seemed to linger even after he was removed from the stage.

Lord Am was the next to be escorted onto the stage. Upon seeing the famous disciplinarian, the crowd broke out into a cheer of recognition, a few individuals even celebrating Raoul’s entrance with festive noisemakers.

Xanthus spun around, raising his hand to hush the crowd. “You will remain *silent* during the administration of these whippings or I will have the Tanaguran Police clear this Plaza. Is that understood?”

The crowd quickly hushed; no one wanted to miss what was coming next.

Lord Am was taken to the whipping post, his immense, muscular arms spread wide above his head and manacled, and then his ankles.

Xanthus was surprised to note what appeared to be faint whip marks on the Blondie’s back. He puzzled over them, again pacing as he shook out his arm and prepared to begin again.

“Raoul Am. You have been found in violation of Sections PA214 and X998.5 of the General Code. You have been sentenced to fifteen strikes with this whip, and you will now receive that punishment. You have the option of Acceleration. Do you choose Acceleration, or reject it?”

“I accept.”

Lord Kahn paused for a moment, surprised at this answer. “Very well,” he replied, flipping the whip back into Acceleration mode. As he began to whip the Blondie who had himself been known as a fearsome disciplinarian, the crowd began to count along with Kobin.

“Five!”

“Six!”

“Seven!”

Raoul, gritting his teeth in agony, at last cried out openly.

“Eight!”

The Blondie’s tortured scream stayed Xanthus for a moment. He moved forward, speaking in a low voice so only Raoul could hear.

“Shall I disengage the Acceleration?”

“No,” Lord Am whispered, his vanity preventing him from making a more rational choice. “I don’t want scars.”

Sighing, Xanthus turned around to again face the crowd, his hands on his hips and his legs spread wide. “This is not a sport at which you may cheer!” he bellowed. “You may not count the strikes! You will be silent during these proceedings, or you *will* be removed from the Plaza! This is your FINAL warning!”

A hushed silence once again settled over the square. In the distance, the hum of hovercraft and the angry blaring of horns in stopped traffic reminded everyone there that they were fortunate to have gained admittance into the Plaza.

Xanthus turned around and resumed the whipping, frowning when the Blondie began to violently shake under the final strikes of his whip. Raoul no longer even tried to restrain his screams; the pain was ungodly, completely unbearable and beyond anything he’d imagined possible.

Despite the cold, Lord Kahn had now broken out into a sweat, and so as Raoul was taken from the stage and Heiku chained to the whipping post, he stripped down to his waist, his upper body bare and glistening with his sweat. The Blondie had an exceptional physique, with immense, muscular shoulders and arms and a broad chest. A tattooed dragon-beast covered one arm, his striking arm, seeming to move as his muscles flexed. He wore his hair in a single long braid, wrapped with cords of leather from his neck down to his waist.

Heiku’s body was also exceptional, and the spellbound crowd gaped at his bionic prosthesis, which extended past his shoulders, the metal workings seeming to mysteriously disappear into his back.

Golarian rushed onto the stage to offer his Master a drink of water, and Xanthus accepted it, draining the container. He stretched his arm and then cracked the whip, rolling his shoulders in preparation for Heiku’s twenty strikes.

“Heiku Quiahtenon,” he announced finally, “you have been found in violation of Sections C107, PA214.5, and X998.5 of the General Code. You have been sentenced to twenty strikes with this whip, and you will now receive that punishment. You have the option of Acceleration. Do you choose Acceleration, or reject it?”

“Accept.”

Shaking his head slightly, Xanthus then stepped back and let the whip fly, giving the Blondie a hard strike.

CRACK!

“One!”

CRACK!

“Two!”

CRACK!

“Three!”

CRACK!

“Four!”

CRACK!

“Five!”

CRACK!

“Six!”

CRACK!

“Seven!”

Heiku, who had been straining against his restraints, let out an anguished wail, his cries nearly drowning out Kobin’s impassive, though loud, count of each strike. Xanthus paused at the tenth strike to give the Blondie the option of disengaging Acceleration, but like Raoul, Heiku refused, too proud of his beautiful body to allow it to be permanently scarred.

“Seventeen!”

CRACK!

“Eighteen!”

CRACK!

“Nineteen!”

CRACK!

“Twenty!”

Heiku, during the last few strikes, lost consciousness, and had to

be carried from the stage.

There was a slight pause as the stage floor was wiped of the Blondie's blood. Now only Omaki Ghan and Iason Mink remained; but their punishment would be the most severe. Omaki was escorted to the whipping post and there shackled.

A renegade hovercraft attempted to fly in close to the Plaza but was cut off by the Tanaguran air patrol. Xanthus waited until the situation was under control and then proceeded.

"Omaki Ghan. You have been found in violation of Sections C107 and X999 of the General Code. You have been sentenced to 25 strikes with this whip, and you will now receive that punishment. You have the option of Acceleration. Do you choose Acceleration, or reject it?"

"I accept Acceleration."

"Very well."

Omaki could hear the Blondie pacing behind him, and he braced himself for the first strike. When the whip cut into his flesh, he gasped, suddenly realizing, with complete horror, the agony that was in store for him.

CRACK!

"One!"

CRACK!

"Two!"

CRACK!

"Three!"

CRACK!

"Four!"

CRACK!

"Five!"

CRACK!

"Six!"

CRACK!

"Seven!"

Lord Ghan closed his eyes, trying to transport himself away from the anguish, not even realizing that he had begun to cry out. He strained futilely against his manacles, desperate to escape the searing heat of the whip.

“Nine!”

CRACK!

“Ten!”

CRACK!

At first he wasn't even aware that Xanthus had stopped, he was so disoriented from the pain.

Then he heard the Blondie's low voice.

“Shall I disengage the Acceleration?”

Not quite comprehending at first, Omaki then realized what Lord Kahn had asked. “Yes,” he whispered, no longer caring that his body would forever carry the scars of his shame; all he wanted now was some attenuation of the horrific pain of the whip.

Even without Acceleration, the whipping was brutal, and the Blondie drifted in and out of consciousness toward the end, his mind focusing on the counting of the strikes and yet unable to comprehend or remember what order numbers came in, or when he could expect the suffering to end.

Like Heiku, he was carried from the stage, in such pain that he did not even realize the whipping had ceased. As he was brought into the tent, he caught a glimpse of Iason, who looked down at him, frowning, before suddenly disappearing from view.

Lord Mink walked out onto the stage, letting his cloak fall from his shoulders. The air was cold against his bare skin, and he shivered. Xanthus regarded him with a look of pity and worry. The Blondie held out his arms to be manacled above his head and spread his legs, his ankles then shackled to the floor of the stage.

Xanthus moved forward to speak to him in a low voice. “I cannot offer you the option of disengaging Acceleration, Iason. I am sorry. At sixty strikes, it is necessary for your safety, otherwise, it is possible you would not survive the whipping.”

“I understand,” Iason replied.

The Blondie stepped back behind him, pausing for a moment before beginning. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to push his emotions aside.

“Iason Mink. You have been found in violation of Sections C107, X999 and X999.5 of the General Code. You have been sentenced to

sixty strikes with this whip, and you will now receive that punishment.”

Lord Mink closed his eyes, moving into a meditative state. He felt the whip, heard Kobin’s voice in the distance, even felt the pain, yet remained removed from the experience.

For the first ten strikes.

“Eleven!”

CRACK!

“Twelve!”

CRACK!

“Thirteen!”

CRACK!

“Fourteen!”

CRACK!

“Fifteen!”

CRACK!

Unlike the other Blondies, Iason had not uttered a sound, even after fifteen strikes. But then, as the whipping continued, he could no longer ignore the agony that began to build, pressing into his consciousness. His body quivered and twitched and then, without even realizing he had done so, at last he began to cry out, his anguish no longer hidden.

Raoul watched Iason’s whipping from the tent, though he remained lying on a cot, feeling useless and cringing with every strike.

But it was Riki who suffered the most. When Iason began to vocalize his anguish, his pet pulled at his own hair, beside himself with grief and worry. And then, like a blinding flash that burned into his mind, the mongrel had a glimpse of Iason’s agony, as though somehow the Blondie had pressed into his thoughts. For a brief moment, their minds were as one, and Riki felt Iason’s despair, his spiraling confusion and misery.

Unable to bear it any longer, he rushed out onto the stage, standing before Iason.

“Stop! He can’t take any more!”

“Pet!” Xanthus yelled, “Remove yourself from this stage *at once!*”

“I’ll take his punishment,” Riki announced, throwing off his jacket and then pulling off his tank. “I’ll be his...proxy.”

Lord Kahn paused, admiring the pet for his courage and loyalty. “You cannot take his place, pet. There is no precedent for it.”

“Actually there *is* a precedent for it.” Headmaster Konami, who had watched the whippings of his former students with sorrow and disbelief, stood at the front of the crowd, arms across his chest. “Erphanes stood in for his brother Ios and took twenty lashes after the battle of Arman.”

“That’s legend,” Xanthus argued.

“No. It’s a fact,” the Headmaster corrected, “recorded in the Desert Chronicles. You have a precedent. If the pet is willing to take his Master’s punishment, he ought to be allowed to do so.”

Lord Kahn walked to the edge of the stage, crouching down to confer with the Headmaster. After a few moments, he stood up.

“Very well, pet. You may stand in for your Master.”

Iason, who was drifting in and out of consciousness, was taken down from the whipping post. The manacles were set too high for Riki and had to be lowered before the pet could even be shackled. Then Xanthus proceeded to whip the mongrel, beginning with the 28th strike.

CRACK!

“Twenty eight!”

CRACK!

“Twenty nine!”

CRACK!

“Thirty!”

From the tent, Raoul watched with disbelief as the mongrel he had despised for so long, who he had only sought to harm and humiliate, did what he himself was unable to do—save Iason. And Riki, unlike the Blondies, was being whipped without any sort of pharmaceutical buffer to help moderate the pain, and with Acceleration, for Xanthus, distracted by the pet’s unexpected request, had not disengaged it. The mongrel’s screams tore into the Blondie’s heart, and effected a permanent change in his attitude toward Riki.



© Riki Before Lord Kahn ©
Art by Tata

Now, for the first time, rather than a mongrel, Raoul saw a man—a powerful, strong man—who had sacrificed himself for the one he loved. In this he had earned Lord Am’s respect, and once won, it would never be lost again.

Iason stirred, his eyes flickering open, the sound of the mongrel’s cries piercing his consciousness. “Riki?” he whispered.

“You’re dreaming,” Raoul soothed. “Riki is all right.”

But Riki was far from being all right. He had stood in for Iason at the 28th strike, and so was to endure 33 brutal lashes, with no pain relief, and no one to step in for him. The crowd watched the pet’s whipping, spellbound, admiring his loyalty and his resolve—for not once did Riki beg for the suffering to end, though his anguished screams sent shivers through all who stood there.

“Thirty six!”

CRACK!

“Thirty seven!”

CRACK!

“Thirty eight!”

CRACK!

“Thirty nine!”

CRACK!

“Forty!”

And then, in a great flash of white light, and with a mighty hum, came an apparition that no one could have anticipated.

Jupiter!

Materializing for the first time outside her private sanctuary, Jupiter held out her hand to halt Xanthus.

The Blondie, dumbstruck at seeing Jupiter levitating before him, knelt down on one knee, bowing, his whip falling from his hand onto the stage.

“This pet shall suffer no more,” Jupiter proclaimed, “and for his courage and loyalty, he will be rewarded with full citizenship. He is now AS-107M, a special pet of the highest ranking, entitled to all the rights and privileges of a citizen of Tanagura.”

With that, Jupiter vanished, sending a ripple of shocked excitement through the crowd. Riki, only vaguely aware of Jupiter’s

appearance, was taken down from the whipping post, amidst cheers and applause. A thunderous boom announced a new round of fireworks, as the Elites celebrated the astounding, completely unexpected appearance of Jupiter. For the first time since the Revolution, a mongrel had been given the rights of a citizen, and all of Amoi was abuzz with the news.



© Raoul Am Watching Riki ©
Art by Tata

Day of the Mongrel

THE DAY HAD BECOME A CELEBRATION like none other in the history of Amoi. The unprecedented gathering of citizens and non-citizens alike, converging on Eos to witness the extraordinary punishment of the Blondies, and the subsequent appearance of Jupiter herself, produced excitement and revelry that was not to be contained. It was as though the entire city was on holiday, the crowds cheering and singing the praises of Jupiter and becoming increasingly intoxicated and loud as the day progressed and the merriment continued.

And it was not just those in Tanagura that were caught up in the moment, for the residents of Midas—and those especially in the slums of Ceres—were equally enthusiastic. Gangs of youth caroused the streets in high spirits, setting off homemade firecrackers and laughing like children.

For the mongrels, the citizenship of Riki the Dark, though his status was but that of a pet—albeit a special one—was celebrated in an almost giddy frenzy. It represented a hope none of them had ever before dared to dream might be realized, that mongrels might one day be admitted back into Jupiter's fold. If one mongrel had become a citizen, why not another? Why not all of them? It was a chance to escape the hard, almost unbearable life most of them had endured since birth, and they clung to this newfound hope with surprising tenacity, shouting cheers to Jupiter and to the mongrel once informally known to them as the Prince of Midas.

Though, like Riki, most mongrels would have found it difficult to exchange their carefree existence for the subservience of pethood, the concept of citizenship was too seductive to ignore; it was easy to make the leap to the possibility of citizenship generally, to gaining permanent admittance into the forbidden city, to be given rights equal to that of eunuchs. Perhaps one day mongrels would even be among the Elite.

While this last possibility was almost absurd in its optimism, the mongrels could not be dissuaded from their celebration; they were determined to turn the day into a festival to end all festivals, and everywhere in Ceres, the same toast and cheer could be heard: “To Riki! To Riki the Dark!” and “All hail Jupiter!”

Shortly after the Public Whippings, the weather shifted, and, much to the delight of the crowds, it began to snow—a beautiful, slowly unfolding swirl of immense flakes, that seemed only to make the day even more surreal. Fireworks continued to explode in the whitening skies, the sound now muffled by the falling snow. The flashes of color were breathtaking against the uncertain white, whose curtain only barely contained the sun that, every so often, broke out from behind clouds to shine down on the spectacle below.

In the tent where the Blondies had been taken after the whippings, the mood was quite different. Raoul, Megala and Xian were all awake but in horrific pain, while Omaki and Heiku drifted in and out of consciousness, groaning. Iason, after mumbling incoherently for a brief span of time, had fallen completely unconscious and lay as though dead. And Riki, whose whipping had not been anticipated and who was brought into the tent without an attending medic, roused every few moments, screaming his agony.

“For pity’s sake! Someone give him an opiate!” Katze commanded angrily, and at his word a medic rushed to the mongrel’s side to attend to him. The self-assured eunuch had become the man in charge, and servants and medics alike turned to him for direction.

“My Master needs an opiate, too,” Yui announced loudly, as he placed a wet cloth on Lord Am’s forehead to help cool his flushed skin. Though Raoul, out of pride, did not vocalize this particular request himself, he was glad for Yui’s attention on this point.

"I gave him one," another medic answered, frowning.

"He needs more! He's barely conscious from the pain!"

The medic peered at Raoul, noting the Blondie's clenched teeth and nodding. "Very well. This will probably put you to sleep," he advised, as he injected more of the potent pain-killer into his arm.

Lord Am only nodded, feeling at that moment extraordinarily grateful to Yui for his intervention. The combination of the whipping and the Acceleration was excruciating, and he felt barely able to keep from crying out. Privately, he now wished he had not taken the Acceleration option, for the pain was mind-boggling, and he was starting to feel a bit desperate.

"I need another medic over here!" Katze shouted, panicking when the two medics feverishly attending Iason were unable to find his pulse. They flipped him onto his back, but even the pressure on his wounds did not rouse him.

"He's not breathing," one murmured, placing a head to his chest.

"What?" Raoul, though in agony from his own pain, watched the unfolding crisis with alarm. "He's not breathing?"

"Wait. I have it," the other announced. "It's faint and very slow, but he has a pulse. And he is breathing—I just saw his chest move."

"That's strange. He took Acceleration. His pulse should be off the charts. And he should be running a fever, but he feels cold."

"He's lost a lot of blood," another medic noted, stating the obvious, for the cot Iason had initially been placed on was soaked crimson.

Lord Am, who was clenching his teeth to keep from groaning his anguish as waves of pain continued to wrack his body, was beside himself with worry when he saw Iason's lifeless form. "Will he be all right?" he demanded.

Katze turned to him. "He's alive."

The great Blondie struggled to stay awake, but the sudden infusion of opiates almost immediately pulled him under, and he fell asleep murmuring Iason's name over and over. Yui attended him quietly, frowning, sharp pains of jealousy only adding to his personal anguish in watching his Master suffer.

Raoul was not the only one to call out Iason's name, for Riki suddenly opened his eyes, crying out for him. Seemingly in response

to the sound of his pet's distress, Lord Mink was roused almost to consciousness, much to everyone's relief. But in the next moment he was motionless again, lying as if dead.

From outside the tent, a loud voice could be heard, arguing with Odi and the other guards. "I demand that you let me pass! I've brought a physician, let me through!"

On hearing this, Katze rushed to the entrance of the tent, where Xanthus Kahn and Yutaku Iman were trying to convince Odi and Ayuda to let them into the tent.

"Odi! Let them in, it's all right," Katze ordered. "Iason needs help!"

Odi and Ayuda exchanged glances and then, nodding, stepped aside to let the Blondies enter.

Lord Iman immediately rushed to Iason's side, throwing off his cape and pushing up his sleeves. "Roll him onto his stomach!" he snapped. "Are you all idiots? He's just been whipped!"

"He barely has a pulse," one medic explained, a little defensively. "And we weren't even sure he was breathing. We were preparing to resuscitate him."

At this, Yutaku quieted, examining Lord Mink for a few moments. He leaned forward, placing a hand to the Blondie's head. "Extraordinary," he whispered.

"What is it?" Xanthus asked, moving up behind him.

"I've only seen this once before. It's a reaction to the Accelerator. He's gone into *interstasis*."

"Interstasis? What does that mean?"

"It's a...sort of hibernation. The dosage of Acceleration was too much for his system, so he's shut down. It's a paradoxical reaction—rather than increasing his metabolism into a catabolic state, he's gone the other direction."

Lord Kahn frowned at this. "But I was advised to give him Accelerator! I was told that was the safest course, because he was taking so many strikes."

"Normally, that would be the case. But apparently Iason is highly reactive to Acceleration." Now the Blondie's gaze shifted to Riki, who had quieted on the cot some distance away. "If his little pet there hadn't stepped in, Iason wouldn't have made it."

Katze and Daryl both looked horrified at this proclamation.

“But he *is* going to make it, now, is that your opinion?” Katze asked.

Lord Iman examined Iason a few more moments before replying. “I think so. Interstasis is a good thing—not every Blondie is capable of it, I believe. At least, it’s only been documented a few times. We’ll just have to wait for him to wake up, but that might be a few days. We need to get him to the hospital now, though.”

Katze shook his head firmly. “We were given explicit instructions *not* to take them to the hospital. Master Iason specifically forbade it. We are going to take them all back to the penthouse.”

“What?! That’s absurd,” Yutaka said challengingly. “Iason needs a hospital!”

“Hold on,” Xanthus argued, lowering his voice. “I can see his point. He wants this to be handled privately.”

“That’s right,” Xian called from his cot. “Iason made his views quite clear: no hospital. And that goes for the rest of us, too.”

“Besides, taking the Blondies to Tanagura Medical would present problems for the hospital—I overheard one of the patrollers saying there was already a crowd there, waiting, and the front desk is overwhelmed with residents suddenly claiming to be sick,” Lord Kahn continued.

Yutaku sighed. “Very well; I’ll have what we need brought to the penthouse.” He flipped open his communicator and made arrangements for equipment and personnel to be transported to the Eos Tower, said arrangements being most effectively achieved, for the most part, by his shouting threats into the phone.

“We’re going to have a slight logistics problem,” Katze pointed out. “There’s no way we can make it back to the Tower through these crowds.”

“The streets are completely gridlocked,” Xanthus agreed. “You’ll have to fly back.”

“That’s the problem: there’s no access inside the penthouse from the roof.”

“What about the Observatory?” Daryl suggested. “The panels retract—couldn’t you land there?”

“But how are we going to get them downstairs?” Katze argued. “Down the spiral staircase? That would be almost impossible.”

“Actually,” Megala answered, “you can just go through the hidden passageway to the lift.”

“What hidden passageway?” Katze demanded.

“Um,” Megala stammered, blushing, “the one I built into the wall of the Observatory. It leads to a wing above the penthouse and then to a lift.”

Xian laughed at this. “Megala! You’re going to be sitting in manure when Raoul and Iason find out there’s *another* hidden passageway you didn’t tell them about.”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” Lord Chi protested, “since it doesn’t lead OUT of the penthouse.”

“Where does the lift go?” Katze asked.

“To the Library, behind a bookcase.”

“But why didn’t you tell them about it, Megala?” Lord Sami pressed.

“I don’t know,” Megala whispered evasively. In fact, he was too embarrassed to admit that he had originally designed the penthouse with Lord Am in mind, fantasizing that one day Raoul—not Iason—would be Head of the Syndicate. And then Megala would be Raoul’s lover, and living in the penthouse. So he had built the Syndicate’s home with all the sorts of hidden passageways *he* would have loved himself, hoping to impress his would-be lover with his ingenuity. In fact, there were other hidden places that he had not told them about, nor did he plan to, though now he rather regretted not confessing to this *particular* passageway, as its discovery would rain censure down on him anew.

Lord Sami continued to snicker, though a bit hoarsely. “Raoul’s going to have you over his knee,” he teased.

Megala reddened at this, finding the thought surprisingly erotic.

“Then it’s settled,” Lord Kahn decided. “We’ll land in the Observatory. And I think we ought to get the Blondies there as quickly as possible.”

“Agreed,” Yutaku said.



“HEY, SEXY,” ASKEL GREETED, GRINNING at his brother as he approached him.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Freyn demanded. “You’re supposed to be back at your post!”

“I told you, you busted my communicator. I tried calling you like, a zillion times.” Askel sidled toward him, and then sat down with a sigh in one of the empty chairs in the hall.

“What are you doing? Get back to Megala’s suite!”

Askel yawned. “Why? There’s no one left in the building. Everyone is at the...thing.”

“You don’t know that! Get your ass back there!”

“Let me borrow your communicator, then. I don’t want to miss it, and since you *broke* mine, it’s only fair.”

Freyn snorted at this. “Dream on. You’re the one who bought a 4599 Unit instead of a 6900. Yours was going to fall apart one way or another, anyway.”

“I thought you said they were impossible to break?” Askel challenged.

“Get back to your post!”

“Give me your communicator, first.”

“Fuck, no!”

“Well, let me watch it with you, then. Turn it on, already. Isn’t it almost time?”

“I mean it, Askel. Get back there or I’ll call Odi.”

Askel shrugged, grinning. “Call him.”

“I will!”

“No, you won’t. Because he said he’d stick that unit up your ass if you called him again.”

Freyn sighed. “He’s going to kill us if he finds out you left your post.”

“So? We won’t tell him. Hurry up! That’s the Tower chime! We’re missing it!”

Freyn fumbled with his communicator, flipping on the holoprojection just as it came online at the strike of 13:00. The Public

Whippings were being broadcast on Jupiter's information channel, with complete visual and 3-dimensional footage. The scene from the square in front of the Emporium was projected in front of them.

"Holy shit!" Freyn breathed.

"Look! It's...Lord Sami!" Askel pointed, excited.

"Of course it's Lord Sami! Idiot! He's about to be whipped!"

"I know, but it's weird to see him on projection. Oh! Check out Lord Kahn! He's fucking *hot*!"

Freyn raised an eyebrow. "He does have a nice body. Shit. Look at those shoulders."

"Isn't there supposed to be audio? Why is there just silence?"

"I don't know." Frowning, Freyn fumbled with the unit.

"We're missing it! He's...he's saying something! Here, give it to me!"

"Dammit! You just...*ow*! Quit grabbing me!"

The brothers fought over the unit for a few moments before it spun out of Freyn's hands and landed on the floor, the projection abruptly ending.

"Fuck! You...you *broke* it, you moron!" Furious, Freyn lunged for Askel, who managed to dodge his punch, but wasn't able to move out of the way before Freyn rammed him with his body, sending them both crashing to the floor. They wrestled on the floor for awhile until finally they both calmed, breathing hard.

"Hmmm." Askel buried his head in his brother's hair, smiling. "You smell good."

"Dammit, Ask! Cut it out!"

"Why? I think you're enjoying this," he teased. "You're getting very...*lumpy*. Hey. Remember the other night, after we drank that cider?"

"Hush," Freyn whispered, swallowing hard.

"You know, we might have had an interesting time...except you came the moment I touched you."

Suddenly keenly aware of Askel's masculinity, Freyn grew quiet, contemplating him for a moment.

"Kiss me," Askel whispered.

"No." Freyn kept Askel's wrists pinned to the floor, and now was

uncomfortably aware of his quickly maturing erection.

“You know you want to.”

Freyn continued to lay on top of his brother, uncertain, wavering between wanting to give into his desires and wanting to get up.

“Want me to suck you off?” Askel teased.

“In your dreams,” Freyn grumbled, releasing him and rolling off him to get up.

Askel laughed, sitting up. “You know, I thought for a moment there you were really going to do it.”

Freyn made no reply, picking up the communicator and punching random buttons in an unsuccessful attempt to bring the projection back online.

“Fuck. Now we have two broken communicators. Odi is going to kill us.”

“*And* we’re missing the broadcast.”

“Well, we’ll get to see that later, anyway, from the archives.”

“I’m starving. When’s Tai bringing lunch?” Askel moaned.

“Askel. Get your ass back to your post *now*. I bloody mean it, or I’ll tell Odi you left it. This is a...serious security breach.”

“Oh, all right, ya big baby. Sheesh! Like, what could possibly happen in five minutes?”

“You are the *worst* security guard in the entire Quadrant. I ought to report you to the Prefect Council.”

“I’m going! Anyway, I never wanted to be a security guard in the first place. I wanted to work at the zoo in Urus.”

“Yeah, well. That’s where you belong, with the other animals.”

“It’s boring. I mean, all I do is just sit there.”

“Try reading the Security Protocol Manual. If you don’t pass your exams next month you’ll be out on the streets.”

“And where’s this great pay you promised? I’ll never be able to afford a pet.”

“I told you a thousand times: he’s put us on a three-month probation. That’s standard for these Blondies. After that we’ll have more credits than we’ll know what to do with. I mean, come on! We’re working for the bloody Head of the Syndicate! You couldn’t ask for a better job. But you’re jeopardizing it for both of us, so fucking get

back to your post!”

“I’m going,” Askel retorted, with a sigh. “Serious security breach,” he muttered, shaking his head as he walked back to the elevator at the end of the hall. “No one’s even here!”

In fact, this was not entirely true. From behind Jupiter’s statue, a young, exceptionally beautiful Aristian had been watching, and waiting. Askel’s absence provided just the opportunity he was hoping for. As soon as the bodyguard left his post, he moved in, quickly disarming the security panel to Megala Chi’s suite with a Xeronian Scrambler.

He was, in truth, astonished at how easy it was to enter the architect’s quarters again, for he had assumed after the initial break-in it would be much more difficult to gain access. Once again, he had fooled the Eos Tower signature detector at the main entrance, but unlike the previous time, he had not dared to simply walk into the building using his own signature. No, this time he had used an *echo board*, a device that replicated the genetic signature of the last individual to leave the building, projecting it as his own.

The entire building seemed strangely quiet and empty, much to his confusion, and—because he did not speak Amoian well—he had no idea that nearly everyone had gone to the Public Whipping, or that Commander Khosi was no longer even on Amoi.

He moved inside, quickly finding exactly what he was looking for: the secret passage that led out of the Blondie’s suite into the bowels of the Tower. Anxious, yet determined, he switched on his lantern and made his way through the dark, winding passageway, down stairs and around countless turns, until he came to a door. With shaking fingers, he flipped the small switch on the wall.

The door hummed open. He entered, finding himself in a room dimly illuminated by a series of blue hanging pendant lights. He had entered what appeared to be a wine cellar. Row after row of shelves harbored countless bottles of wine, the sight momentarily distracting the young man from his project.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, upon seeing an entire wall of Aristian Red Emperor, knowing how expensive the wine was.

He shook his head, and then flipped open his thermoscanner,

frowning when he saw from the readout that there was no one inside the penthouse. He had tracked the Commander to Lord Mink's penthouse using a rather sneaky method: Voshka Khosi had purchased and registered a pet ring from Amoi for Aranshu just before he had run away, intending to force him to wear it permanently. Aranshu, learning of his intentions, had managed to slip away from Alpha Zen before the imported ring arrived. He had long suspected his Master might have kept the ring, in hopes of capturing him again and making good his promise to force Aranshu to wear it, and on this point his suspicions proved correct: Voshka always carried the ring with him, wherever he went.

The ring, of course, had a tracing device embedded in it, with a limited range of about one Sector. Aranshu had never before been close enough to his former Master to use this information to his advantage, but upon hearing that the Commander was to attend the Intergalactic Trade Convention on Amoi, Aranshu, at that time temporarily residing on the border planet of Icaria, immediately took a shuttle to the desert planet.

Upon his arrival he had easily traced the ring signature to the penthouse. But if there was no one currently inside the penthouse, then it meant the Commander was no longer in possession of the ring, and all his labors to track him down had been for naught. But what was the ring doing inside the penthouse of Iason Mink, Head of the Syndicate?

"Damn!" he muttered, perplexed. He made his way up a small staircase and then opened another door; in the next instant he was in the kitchen of Iason's penthouse, wondering where everyone had gone.

He followed the ring signal through the penthouse until he arrived at the room where the signal originated, and finding the door open, he peered inside. Moments later he located the ring itself, lying half-concealed beneath one of the pillows on the bed. He stared at it for a long moment, shivering as he remembered Voshka's promise to make him his pet forever.

A sudden noise startled him, and he whipped around, alarmed. He heard voices—or was it screaming? He listened, and then realized he

was hearing the sound of children running down the hall. He looked at his thermoscanner: two individuals had just entered the penthouse. Stepping into the shadows of the room, he waited, but was startled when he was suddenly face to face with a levitating, spherical robotic device of some sort, which was attempting to scan his retina.

He gasped, backing up against the wall and quickly shutting his eyes, but it was too late: the Guardian had the information it needed. It processed the three conflicting identities in its database and, being only a security device and not a sentient computer capable of intricate problem-solving, simply merged together the information: a Blondie genetic signature, a retinal scan matching an Aristian identified as Wyn Quantum as well as the registered signature of Aranshu, missing pet of Voshka Khosi.

“Good afternoon, Lord Aranshu,” it greeted in Aristian, unable to process the absurdity of a Blondie being also a registered pet. “Your Master is looking for you.” The Guardian, configured only to protect Aki, was unconcerned with Aranshu’s status as a runaway pet, other than to relate the relevant information that was in his database, that Voshka Khosi had reported him as missing. Nor did it attempt to access anything other than basic identification records, for if it had, it would have discovered that Wyn Quantum was wanted on Aristia for the massacre at the Merovian palace.

“Holy shit,” Wyn whispered, awed by the tiny device and its impressive identification capabilities.

“Your Master has been looking for you for ten years,” the Guardian repeated.

“My ‘*Master*’ can fucking kiss my ass!” Wyn retorted hotly.

“Shall I relay the message, ‘Holy shit, my Master can fucking kiss my ass,’ to Commander Voshka Khosi?” the Guardian asked, rather robotically.

Wyn smiled. “No. I’ll deliver that message personally. No wait! Yes, please *do* deliver that message—but wait about two weeks before you do so.”

“Your message, ‘Holy shit, my Master can fucking kiss my ass,’ will be relayed to Commander Voshka Khosi in two weeks, Lord Aranshu,” the Guardian confirmed. “Have a nice day.”



☪ Lord Aranshu ☪
Art by Shuangwen

With that, it turned and whizzed out of the room just as quickly as it had arrived.

Wyn watched it, smiling. He rather liked being called Lord Aranshu. It certainly made his pet name more appealing. His communicator had lit up and he gazed at the incoming message, frowning.

Your search request for automatic relays of known information regarding Commander Voshka Khosi, Supreme Ruler of Alpha Zen has produced the following relevant data: Commander Khosi departed Amoi at 5139.457.9.17 Amoian time today on his ship Emperor-VI, bound for Aristia.

“Fuck,” he whispered, disappointed. He waited for a few more moments and, determining that the children had left, hurried back toward the kitchen, anxious to leave the penthouse before he was discovered, now that he had learned of the Commander’s departure.

As he made his way through the great hall, however, he couldn’t help look around a bit, gaping at the luxurious furnishings in disbelief. Amoian Blondies, or at least, this Iason Mink, certainly had a bit of wealth, that much was obvious. He hadn’t seen luxury to compare to it since his days on Alpha Zen at Voshka’s palace—though admittedly, the Commander was in possession of far more impressive living quarters than Iason’s penthouse.

As he was gaping at his surroundings, he happened to catch sight of something on a table near the fireplace that made him catch his breath. He moved closer, his eyes widening.

How could it be? And...*what did it mean?*

With shaking fingers, he picked up the small book that was lying on the table, which had imprinted into the cover a symbol he recognized immediately. It was a design based on the Amoian letters Y and X, and he knew it because he had seen it before, many times: his mother had worn a brand-mark exactly like it on her shoulder. Though she had never told him where it had come from, somehow he always suspected that it had something to do with his father, who he believed must have been a Blondie, based on his own genetic makeup. He had been told the Blondies were sterile, but there was no other explanation. And now, this book—with the mark he knew so well—

convinced him it was so; but did it belong to Iason Mink? Why, then, were the initials X and Y, not I and M? He flipped through the pages but found it was written entirely in Amoian, which he could not read.

Though he wanted to explore the penthouse a bit more, the sound of more voices approaching forced him to abandon any such project; he slipped through the kitchen and left the way he had entered, never once detected, as though he had not even been there at all.



HER RAGE HAD BEEN THE PUREST EMOTION she had experienced since her awakening: her rage, and her deep hurt at her betrayal. Jupiter had been devastated as she watched her children conspire against her, but there was one among the Blondies whose treachery tore into her heart—for Jupiter did, indeed, have a heart.

That Iason, her beloved favorite, would turn against her, would be the mastermind behind the plan to destroy her, was almost inconceivable to the sentient computer. She was so bewildered by the conversations of the Blondies that she had only been able, at first, to watch in horror and despair as they plotted against her. In truth, she had only utilized Enyu as a spy to see if the rumors about Iason and his pet were true, but at the most, Jupiter had only intended to reprimand her favorite again and insist that the mongrel be sent away.

To learn, instead, that Iason was actively seeking to overthrow her authority was a complete surprise, and her rage was such that she had given him an impossible sentence—one that even she knew was too severe for the Blondie to bear. She had fully expected him to take her offer and surrender the mongrel pet and thereby submit to her authority; she would have then reduced his sentence, as promised.

But Iason had refused to give up the mongrel. And for that she had distanced herself from him, allowing him to be shackled to the whipping post to endure the sixty strikes of his original sentence. But from the very first strike she had been overwhelmed with sorrow as she watched him suffer. When Iason began to scream, Jupiter realized, with growing anxiety, that she had made a grave error—that

the sentence was, indeed, too severe, and that no Blondie could endure it. Yet she could not intervene without further damaging her authority, and so she was forced to watch helplessly as her favorite moved in and out of consciousness.

And then an astonishing, miraculous thing had happened. Iason's pet had stepped in for him, in a pure act of love so selfless, so beautiful, that Jupiter could remain hidden no more. The very mongrel that had, for so long, incited such feelings of jealousy, now inspired relief, gratitude, and even affection in the sentient computer. Riki had saved Iason from further agony, and for the first time, Jupiter looked upon him with kinder eyes, recognizing that the bond between Iason and his pet was something beyond even her reach or comprehension. She had halted the punishment then, deciding at that moment to finally grant Iason what he had begged her for, what she had known for so long he wanted but had been so reluctant to give.

Iason could keep his brave little pet; Jupiter had decided that she would grant an exception to the expected rules of pet administration, beginning with Riki. She had made the mongrel a *special* A-class pet, to at least confer on him the status that was necessary to make such an arrangement palatable to the other Elites.

Now Jupiter remained alone in her sanctum, reflecting on all these things, at long last coming face to face with a hard truth: she would never share with Iason the same bond that he apparently enjoyed with his pet; realizing, too, that some of her laws no longer protected Amoi and created order, but instead were obstacles to the happiness of her Elite, thereby making further rebellion an absolute certainty.

And so, as citizens and non-citizens alike celebrated throughout the night, Jupiter rewrote the General Code for the new world that had emerged.



IASON STRUGGLED TO REGAIN CONSCIOUSNESS, his thoughts now bent around one concern only: Riki. He was certain he had heard his pet screaming. Riki was in trouble and needed him, but much as the Blondie tried, he could not seem to find his way out of the place of

darkness and pain where he now found himself.

And then he saw a familiar face, gazing at him with concern from some feet away.

Raoul.

"You're dreaming," the Blondie soothed. "Riki is all right."

A blackness overcame him then and the world seemed to fall away, and he with it, clinging to Raoul's softly spoken reassurances. Then, for a long time, he was nowhere at all. As his pain forced him into awareness again, he was comforted by a wondrous warmth, an incredible absence of pain, as A-class pharmaceuticals were once again pumped into his body. He drifted away again, this time peacefully, riding on a sea of indecipherable dreams.

He opened his eyes: Lord Am, once again, was gazing at him, this time closer, in a chair next to his bed. He was back at the penthouse, in his own room.

The Blondie put a hand to his forehead, smiling. "Your fever has broken, finally."

Lord Mink stared back at him, confused, trying to remember what had happened. Then, images from the whipping pressed into his mind, and he shuddered, memories of the pain and confusion like shards of glass piercing into his thoughts.

"Can I get you anything?" Raoul asked.

"Riki," Iason whispered.

Raoul took Iason's hands in his, his expression serious. "You can't see him now. He's sleeping."

Iason's brow furrowed at this, and he frowned. "Wake him up," he demanded irritably. "I want to see him."

"I can't wake him up, Iason. He's still recovering."

"What?" At this, the Blondie struggled to get up. He was on his stomach, and found, much to his dismay, that he was too weak to move.

"Don't try to get up. You're not ready, either. Relax, Iason. I'll tell you about Riki."

"Tell me? Tell me *what*?"

"Iason, Riki is going to be fine. But he's been through a lot. What he did for you...well, even I have to concede it: he was very brave."



☞ Lord Am Carries Riki ☞
Art by Shuangwen

“What do you mean?” Iason demanded. “What are you talking about? Where is he?”

“He’s in his room, sleeping. I’ll tell you what happened, but you must promise me not to get upset.”

This only seemed to inflame Iason’s worries even more, and he again struggled to move. “What have I to get upset about? Is he ill? Is he...injured?”

“Iason, stop trying to get up or I’ll tell you nothing,” Raoul scolded.

“Please tell me, Raoul!”

“I’m trying to. Did you hear me? Quit moving like that! Just lie still.”

At this, Lord Mink went limp, gazing imploringly at Raoul. “What happened to Riki?”

“He’s recovering, same as you. When you...were being whipped, Riki—well, much as you know I hate to give the mongrel any credit, I have to tell you, he did something...rather extraordinary. He ran out onto the stage and stood in front of you, and then demanded he take the rest of your punishment.”

Lord Mink, not quite believing what he was hearing, and starting to doubt that he was awake after all, stared back at Raoul in disbelief. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that he stood in for you. Xanthus told me it was the 28th strike. You had lost consciousness. I’m not sure you could have taken much more. And there he was, standing on the stage, stripping off his shirt and insisting that he take the rest of your strikes. I could hardly believe it myself, I confess.” Lord Am smiled grimly, remembering the awe he had felt when Riki had offered himself in Iason’s place, the small, fierce mongrel standing fearlessly before mighty Kahn, whose whip was still dripping with blood, and whose voice alone was enough to intimidate most Blondies.

Lord Mink slowly digested this information, a thousand emotions pressing into his heart, all at once. He was stunned with Riki’s willingness to take on his own punishment, and touched by it, so much so that at first he could not even speak. His pet...went under the whip, for *him*? Iason knew, from the horror he had experienced, what hell Riki had been through, and it physically hurt him to think of his

pet in such agony. This was not the same as a turn under the taming stick or any other of the countless punishments Iason had used to correct his wayward pet, this was pure pain in the highest degree—tortuous, agonizing, impossibly wretched misery. Much as he loved that Riki had stood in for him, had been willing to help him in his darkest hour, it was terrible to confront the reality of his sacrifice, and what the poor mongrel had suffered in his stead. And he was worried; could his pet endure such punishment? How many strikes exactly had he taken? He felt too disoriented and upset to try and count, but if he stood in at the 28th strike, that meant...could it be possible? More than half the strikes? His pet had taken thirty three lashes with a whip, more than even *he* had endured?

“Oh pet,” he whispered, his voice shaking. “Is he all right, Raoul?”

“Yes. I told you—he’s going to be fine, though it’s a bit of a tough ride for him, that much is clear enough.”

Then, as the full realization of what Raoul was saying sunk in, Iason began to feel one overriding emotion: anger.

“You mean to tell me that no one stopped him?” he demanded.

“Iason. You were in agony. No one could bear to see you that way. I wasn’t in a position to do much of anything but, I confess, I wouldn’t have stopped him, and not for the reasons you think. It wasn’t that I wanted to see him suffer. I just couldn’t bear your suffering any more.”

“Are you saying Riki took thirty three strikes? Xanthus—he agreed to that? Raoul! Help me up.”

“I told you, Iason. You can’t see him now, he’s resting. But, no, he didn’t take all those strikes. There’s something else I have to tell you. Calm down!”

But the Blondie, in his concern for Riki, had summoned all his strength and managed to sit up on the edge of the bed. “I want to see him *now*, Raoul.”

Lord Am sighed. “I see you’re going to be stubborn about this. I’ll bring him to you. But, let me finish telling you what happened. Lie back down, Iason.”

“Not until I see Riki.”

“You obstinate, exasperating...lie down this moment or perhaps I

shall turn you over my knee! I'll make that whipping seem like a picnic in Vendel Park compared to what I have in store for you!"

At this, Iason softened, smiling slightly at Raoul's ridiculous threat. He suddenly felt extraordinarily weak, even his small bit of effort sapping him.

"That's it," Lord Am encouraged, as Iason lay back on the bed. "Now. I'll tell you the rest. It was quite...remarkable, actually. It was the 40th strike, and suddenly Jupiter appeared on the stage." He paused for a moment, smiling at Iason's surprised look, and then nodded. "Yes. Jupiter. Suddenly she was there, standing in front of Riki, with her arm held up to stop Xanthus." Lord Am laughed, remembering the priceless look on Lord Kahn's face as the startled Blondie knelt down, his whip falling onto the stage. "I don't remember the exact words, but it's all on archive, so you can watch it yourself, later. I confess at the time I was just as stunned as everyone else, so—"

"Raoul! What did Jupiter say?" Iason interrupted impatiently.

"She said Riki had suffered enough. And she gave Riki formal status. Jupiter made him a citizen, and a special A-class pet."

Iason stared back at him in disbelief. A mongrel formally recognized by Jupiter? But what exactly did that mean?

"Bring him to me," he pleaded.

Raoul nodded, rising. "If you insist." He paused for a moment. "Though you should understand, he's still a bit delirious. The Acceleration, and he's so small—the whipping was very hard on him."

"Bring him," Iason repeated, now even more worried.

So Raoul went to fetch the mongrel, who was sleeping rather fitfully. As the Blondie gathered him in his arms and began walking with him back to Iason's room, Riki opened his eyes, startled to see Raoul smiling down at him.

"What the fuck?" he mumbled, confused.

"It's all right. Iason wants to see you."

"Iason?" Riki's eyes widened, his expression suddenly alarmed. "Is he okay?"

"He's doing much better. You...probably saved his life."

It was the first time Lord Am had attributed to him anything that

wasn't an insult of some kind, and Riki hardly knew how to respond. "This is a dream," he murmured, finally, closing his eyes.

Raoul carried him to Iason, who, on seeing Riki's fragile state, was overcome with emotion.

"Riki?" he whispered hoarsely, as Lord Am gently laid him down on his stomach.

Riki had fallen asleep again. Iason looked at the bandages that covered his back, frowning. "Oh, love." He reached out, brushing the hair from his face, and the mongrel's eyes fluttered open momentarily.

"Iason."

"Hello, love." Lord Mink smiled, although he found his eyes were filling with tears.

Riki was too weak to answer, closing his eyes again.

"Oh, pet." Iason felt as though his very heart would burst open, all his love and worry for his pet spilling out of him, for it was too much to contain. "My poor little pet! Oh, Riki, Riki. How could you have done this for me?"

Raoul watched this interchange for a moment, and then backed away, leaving Iason alone with the mongrel. Master and pet almost immediately fell asleep together, each comforted by the presence of the other.



GUY WAS HALF DRUNK, YET AGAIN, STARING at the table in front of him, when he was startled by a jingling sound. He blinked, trying to focus on the object that had just been tossed in front of him. Then he froze. It was Kei's pendant! He seized it, though a little clumsily, looking up with surprise.

"Riki told me to give that to you. I'm not sure why he had it," Katze explained, lighting up a smoke and sitting down on the other side of the booth. "You look like shit, Guy."

"Where is Kei?" Guy cried. "He...he can't be...where Riki said!"

"How the fuck should I know?" Katze shrugged. "I don't even know who he is. Although next time you see him, tell him I intend to kick

his ass for trying hedge into my territory. I've heard all sorts of reports and let me tell you, I don't intend to let him get away with it."

"I haven't seen him in weeks!"

"I shouldn't wonder, with you looking like that. Try bathing." Katze looked around the pool hall, curious as to why it was so deserted. "Where's the rest of the gang?"

Guy scowled. "They're all...celebrating. Toasting Riki! I refused!" The mongrel, a bit incoherent after drinking so much, focused on the pendant again, trying to make sense of it. "This pendant, how did he get this? It must be...then...is it true? Tell Riki, tell him I'm going to kill him!"

"Tell him yourself, I have no patience for your little love feuds. But here's a bit of advice for you. If you try to go near Riki, Odi and Ayuda will break your arms and legs, one at a time. So whatever it is you're so pissed about, I suggest you get over it. Be happy for him, Guy. He got out of this dump and is living a better life. You could too, you know. Have you heard about Jupiter's new laws?"

"I'd sooner die than be...a *pet*," Guy spat. "And I'll never forgive him! *Never!* Tell him that! Tell him I'll have my vengeance!"

"Suit yourself." Katze rose, taking another long drag on his smoke before crushing the butt onto the table. "You're pathetic, you know that?"

"Fuck you! Fuck you and everyone else, too! I'll make him pay for what he did! Tell Riki that!"

Katze frowned at this but shrugged it off, deciding that Guy was simply drunk. And Guy was not the only one—everywhere he went, mongrels and Elites alike were intoxicated. It was completely insane; he'd never seen anything like it in all his days. It was almost like anarchy. No—it was more like an immense party, a party that had taken on a life of its own. A celebration like no other, and one that everyone seemed to be enjoying, except for, of course, the Midas and Tanaguran Police, who were completely overwhelmed with the crowds, and who had given up on trying to get traffic moving again. Katze had been forced to borrow Iason's hovercraft to reach Midas, for the streets had become venues for the extended Moonday celebration, the crowds merrily making their way around the

abandoned vehicles that lined every road in Tanagura, Midas, and beyond.

He started to leave, turning to gape at a group of mongrels raising their beer bottles in unison. "To Riki! To Riki the Dark!" they cried.

"Unbelievable," he whispered, shaking his head.



IT WAS SOME AFTER THE PUBLIC WHIPPINGS that the Blondies began emerging from their respective rooms, gathering in the great hall. Xian, Megala and Raoul were the first ones to do so, followed by Heiku, and then Omaki. Iason remained in bed for several days, at first in interstasis, and later, with a high fever, as the residual Acceleration in his system kicked in and finally increased his metabolic processes. Yousi was there, as well, mostly to help comfort Heiku, and because he was frightened of the crowds that had gathered outside Eos Tower, calling for the Blondies to come out.

The great hall was filled with gift baskets for the Blondie Masters from well-wishing Elites. There were even a few for Riki, for it turned out that most who witnessed the whippings actually admired the Blondies for their courage to challenge Jupiter and respected Riki for his loyalty to his Master. In truth, the six Blondies had become nothing less than heroes, and Riki a living legend, for it was his sacrifice that had garnered Jupiter's intercession and appearance, something that had never before happened in the history of Amoi.

The Blondies, all save Iason, were gathered around the fire one afternoon, when Askel announced that Headmaster Konami Sung had arrived to see them.

"Jupiter save us," Heiku groaned. "I think I'd rather go back under the whip."

"I hope he doesn't plan on lecturing us," Omaki replied.

"Of course he's going to, that's why he's come," Raoul said, with a great sigh. "I wouldn't be surprised if he brings his cane and insists we all take a few strikes."

The others laughed at this, although it was not far from the truth. Headmaster Konami was furious with them, and his entrance in the

great hall made this fact quiet clear.

"I always knew the lot of you would be trouble," he began, his brows drawn together in a fierce expression as he strode into the hall, "but I never would have imagined you'd all be so defiant—and *stupid*—as to challenge Jupiter. It seems my tireless efforts to mold you were all for nothing. You are all complete deviants, with no regard for laws of any kind, and in my view you should have all taken twice as many lashes as you did, for your insubordination. If it were up to me, there wouldn't be skin left on your backs. In fact, I ought to give each of you a thrashing, right here and now. Except you, Yousi. I don't mean you. But as for the rest of you, I really should have brought my whip."

"Won't you sit down, Headmaster?" Lord Ghan replied, a bit saucily.

"You see! That," the Headmaster pointed to Omaki, "that is *precisely* what I'm talking about: no respect for authority whatsoever. Well! You see where your insolence has gotten you? Did I not warn you that Jupiter's laws are absolute?"

Heiku groaned. "Please. We've already been punished. Must we endure another one of your lectures?"

"*This* is only the beginning," the Headmaster warned, arms crossed on his chest as he stood before them, glaring. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. You'll tell me everything, down to the last detail, and then you'll listen to what I have to say, for as long as I say it. Xian! Don't roll your eyes."

"For pity's sake, we're not children," Lord Sami argued, pouting.

"Indeed, you are *not*. Which makes your behavior even more surprising. You should all be models for others to emulate—you should be paragons! Paragons, I tell you! Instead, you act like a pack of scoundrels, plotting against the very hand that feeds you!"

The Blondies were forced then to endure the longest tongue-lashing any of them had ever before received from the infamous Headmaster, who refused to let up until all of them appeared duly remorseful and utterly chastised, their heads bowed in shame.

After what seemed like an eternity, Lord Sung finally fell silent, looking at each of them with transparent emotion, his anger and

disappointment fueling his censure.

"Where is Iason?" he asked, finally.

"He's still in bed. He's probably asleep," Raoul answered, hoping to spare him the inevitable reprimand, at least for the time being.

But the Headmaster was not to be dissuaded. "I'll see him now."

Lord Am rose with a sigh and led him to the Blondie's room. Iason was, in fact, awake, and sitting up in bed, gazing down at Riki, who was asleep next to him.

Lord Mink looked up, his face showing his surprise and mortification upon seeing the Headmaster. He lowered his eyes, unable to meet Lord Sung's gaze.

"Good. At least you have the decency to feel shame," Konami remarked, his voice sharp, though somehow less severe than it had been with the other Blondies.

Raoul left them alone, and the Headmaster moved closer to Iason, sighing loudly as he sat down on the chair next to the bed. For some moments there was a strained silence between them.

"Go ahead," Iason said finally. "I deserve whatever you have to say."

"Iason," Konami answered, shaking his head. "In fact, I find I am at a loss for words."

"That does not surprise me."

"*Why*, Iason?" he asked imploringly, his voice lowering to a whisper. "Why? You risked everything—surely you know Jupiter was lenient with you. You might have been put to death!"

"I know. I am...fortunate for Jupiter's grace." Now Lord Mink dared to finally look the Headmaster in the eye. "I thought I was doing what was best, for all of us."

At this, Konami Sung grew angry. "That's not true. Don't give me excuses, now." His gaze shifted to the mongrel. "You did it to satisfy your own sexual perversions. Isn't that so? You wanted this pet, even though it displeased Jupiter. Your desires blinded you. But you always do just as you please, don't you? Didn't I warn you that you would find yourself in serious trouble one day if you persisted in following your desires rather than the law?"

"Yes, you did," Lord Mink conceded, "though not precisely in those

words. And perhaps you are partially right, with regard to Riki. But quite honestly, I thought it might be better for all of us, to be free from Jupiter's authority."

"Do you hear what you're saying? Iason: even if you were *able* to bring Jupiter down—which I find remarkable that you even entertained as a remote possibility—think about the consequences! Jupiter controls *everything*. Without Jupiter, Amoi falls apart. You don't see that? We depend on her for everything: energy, security, order, food, life—even our culture requires Jupiter. It would be pure anarchy—nothing short of chaos—to attempt to survive on this barren planet without her. Tanagura's prosperity is due entirely to Jupiter. Do you not see that? How could you think it was even possible to exist without her? And *you*, of all people, Iason! You are the Head of the Syndicate! Jupiter has been so good to you, how could you even think of betraying her?"

Iason bowed his head. "Perhaps you are right. I was...blinded, perhaps. But not just by my desires." Now he looked up again, into the Headmaster's eyes. "By love."

Lord Sung sighed, exasperated. "I don't understand you. Love? Did you give a thought to your *duty*—your responsibility to all of Amoi, and to Jupiter herself? If there is anyone who should elicit your love, it should be Jupiter. You have no rank or position outside the society Jupiter has ordained. Suffice it to say, I am deeply, though regrettably, disappointed in you, Iason."

These words cut into Iason's heart, for the Headmaster had always been the closest thing to a father to him. He did not mind so much being scolded, but he hated hearing the disappointment in Konami's voice and especially this last remark. He nodded, his throat suddenly constricting.

"However," Lord Sung continued, after a moment, "that does not mean I've stopped caring for you, Iason. And it seems Jupiter has decided to forgive you. You've always been her favorite, you know, even when you were just a boy. She had me watch after you, even then."

"I remember," Iason replied, with a sad smile.

"I should have known—you know, I always thought, back when

you and Raoul were engaged in your salacious little trysts, that I should have done something more to discourage your disobedience. Perhaps you would not have thought to commit such an egregious act, had I give you more severe punishment then.”

“I found it severe enough,” Iason replied, remembering the whipping he and Raoul had once endured at the Headmaster’s arm.

“Apparently not: I should have swung harder. All my sources tell me that you two continued to engage in forbidden contact years after you left the Academy.”

“Surely, Headmaster, you don’t believe we were the only ones enjoying such pleasures? I find Jupiter’s prohibitions on this point completely untenable. It is impossible to resist such temptations, particularly at that age.”

“Not impossible,” Konami argued. “*Difficult*, perhaps, I grant you. But I assure you, I have never done so, nor ever shall.”

Lord Mink raised an eyebrow at this. “*Never*, Headmaster? I confess I feel a bit of pity for you, on that point.”

“Hush,” the Headmaster scolded. “I’ll not have such talk. Have you forgotten who you are addressing? This is precisely my point. I made no headway with you at all. It is just like when you were a boy and continued to go out walking in the rain. No matter how many times I reprimanded you, you never listened to me. I should have turned you over my knee then, and given you a sound thrashing. I was too soft on you, that much is clear. Although, I daresay I gave Yousi his fair share of whippings, and it didn’t stop *his* downfall, either.” He sighed, discouraged. “So I suppose I must consider it...a personal failure, somehow, that it’s all come to this.”

“No. It’s just as you said—I did what I wanted, even though I knew the consequences.”

“Well, I’m pleased that you’re taking personal responsibility. I can’t say as much for your peers; I lectured them nearly an hour before any of them seemed remotely sorry for what they’d done.”

Iason smiled at this, wishing he could have witnessed the reprimand, with the Blondies sinking down in their chairs as the Headmaster tore into them with his relentless tongue.

“And I must confess, I can at least see there’s something quite

special about the mongrel you've taken such a liking to. It was extraordinary, his standing in for you, I'll grant you that, though I'm astonished that Jupiter intervened, and even more so that she gave him formal status. It's almost as though she's giving you what you wanted all along. Of course, she had to punish you—all of you—for what you'd done, because you'd broken her laws. But do you know, she's appended three new laws to the General Code?"

"Oh?" Lord Mink found this surprising. For as long as he could remember, the Code had never been modified.

Konami nodded. "Yes. One is about the restoration of eunuchs, and gives specific procedures for requesting Jupiter's sanction to do so. The second is, apparently, for *you*, Iason. It is now legal to keep any pet permanently, if a Master wishes it, and this does not require Jupiter's authorization. And I must say, it's generating quite a bit of talk. But it's the third law that has stirred up the most controversy and excitement. They're calling it Riki's Law—on the Channel, that is. It relates to the citizenship of mongrels. Jupiter will consider petitions for citizenship from any mongrel willing to acknowledge her authority. Citizenship is not automatic, and so far, no one has received a response, but it is now a legal possibility."

Iason was at a loss for words. The implications of the third law were far-reaching, yet he found the only thing he cared about at the moment was the second law the Headmaster had mentioned. Jupiter was allowing him to keep Riki? It seemed impossible, and the Blondie was stunned by the news.

"Of course, as you might imagine, this has not been warmly received by many of the Elites," the Headmaster continued. "I think it will be very difficult to integrate mongrels into Tanagura. In Midas, perhaps. Mongrels are viewed with such contempt—we were all trained to see them thus, so it will not be an easy transition to think of them any other way. Are you well? You look rather pale, Iason."

"I'm...a bit tired," the Blondie confessed.

"Then, I'll take your leave," the Headmaster replied, rising. "Although, I hope you don't think I'm finished with you. We'll have another little chat when you're up and around again." He gave Iason a pointed look, warning him that more reprimands were coming.

“Yes, Headmaster,” Lord Mink replied meekly. In the presence of the great Blondie, he felt like a child again. No one but Headmaster Konami could produce that effect on him, and he found he was quite anxious to somehow win back his approval.

Lord Sung smiled at him, his eyes shining with affection. “So. Get some rest. I’ll call on you again in a few days.”

Iason nodded, and with that, the Headmaster turned on his heels and returned to the great hall. The Blondies were all still sulking from being admonished so thoroughly, and Konami got some satisfaction from this. It had taken him awhile, but he had finally managed to reach them. He intended to keep them firmly in line from that point on, no matter what it took.

“I’m pleased to see you’re all using the moment for some private reflection on your transgressions,” he remarked. “And I hope you don’t think I’m through with you. We’ll all be meeting here, every week on Jupiter’s Eve, to review your duties and responsibilities as Blondies and to memorize the General Code.”

“What!” Lord Quiahtenon protested. “Surely you can’t be serious! We’re not still at the Academy, you know!”

The Headmaster regarded Heiku with a look of disbelief and stern disapproval, one hand on his hip. “How dare you challenge me, Heiku! Have you forgotten that I’m the Head of the Eos Disciplinary Board? I think I’ll bring my whip next time and remind you who you’re dealing with.”

The Blondies all fell into a grumpy silence, waiting impatiently for the Headmaster to leave.

“One more thing: I have a summons from Jupiter.” The Headmaster held up a piece of paper. “Where’s the logbook? I’m to confiscate that.”

The Blondies looked at each other in confusion, for no one seemed to remember what had become of it.

“I haven’t seen it...since that day,” Raoul remarked.

“Nor I,” Omaki agreed.

“Well, I suggest you find it. I’ll give you until next week to come up with it. Try to stay out of trouble until then.” With that, Lord Sung finally left.

“Headmaster Konami...is a *sadist*,” Heiku grumbled.

Raoul groaned. “Memorizing the General Code *again*? Perhaps it would have been better to have been whipped to death.”

“Remember, though, we’re all polygons,” Yousi advised, looking serious.

Heiku pursed his lips together, trying not to laugh. “*Paragons*, love.”

“Oh yes,” Omaki groaned, “the *paragon* speech. I can’t believe he threw that old dogma at us again, like we hadn’t already heard it a thousand times.”

At this, Megala cleared his throat, sending the whole group into a collective moan.

“Sorry,” Lord Chi whispered.

“As annoying as it is, I’d rather listen to you clearing your throat for an eternity than have to meet with the Headmaster even one more time,” Heiku exclaimed. “But *every* week? Jupiter help us.”

“Well, forgive me for saying so, but he’s only doing his duty,” Megala replied timidly. “I mean, I don’t want to sit through more lectures, either, but after all, we did sort of try to bring down Jupiter.”

“I would have guessed you’d be more angry about all this, Chi-chi,” Lord Ghan said thoughtfully. “You didn’t really do anything. After all, you just popped in one evening at dinner time and the next thing you knew, you were being dragged off to be publicly whipped.”

“Yes, well, I confess I wasn’t too happy about it,” the Blondie agreed. “But then, I know I deserved it, for the Eos Tower, I mean.”

“Speaking of which,” Raoul admonished, “I thought you said you showed us *all* the secret passageways? And then we learn about the one leading from the Observatory?”

Megala blushed, looking down at his hands. “I...I suppose I forgot about that one.”

“Hmmm.” Raoul crossed his arms on his chest, looking suspicious.

“So, Megala. Are there any *more* hidden passageways?” Omaki pressed.

Lord Chi shook his head vehemently. “No. Just that one, I swear!”

“And why don’t we believe you?” Lord Sami teased. “For all we know, there are secret passageways under the entire city, and all of us

get spied on by you routinely.”

“Oh no,” Megala protested. “That would have cost far too much.”

“So you’re saying, you *would* have done so, if you had possessed the resources?” Lord Am challenged.

“Oh! I didn’t mean that. I was only thinking of the logistics, when Xian said that.”

“There are more passageways, I’ll wager,” Heiku asserted.

Lord Chi shifted in his seat a little uncomfortably, relieved when Tai brought in some tea and cake, which distracted the Blondies from their interrogation.

The next morning, Lord Mink joined them in the great hall for breakfast, his presence greeted with relief by everyone there.

“You had a rough ride, Iason,” Raoul remarked. “Good to see you looking so well.”

Iason gave him a short nod, taking his place at the head of the table.

“Interstasis,” Lord Quiahtenon murmured, bringing a hand up to his chin and looking thoughtful. “I’ve always wondered about that. They told me, when I lost my arm, that they’d hoped I’d fall into it, but I never did. In fact, I was conscious the entire time, at least until they pumped all those opiates into me. Do you remember anything, after the whipping?”

“Not really. Not until recently. I think I may have dreamed.”

“May I be so bold as to proclaim, officially, that public whippings suck,” Omaki stated loudly.

“Here, here!” The other Blondies voiced their agreement, tapping their water classes with their spoons.

“Seriously, I didn’t think that sort of pain was even possible,” Heiku mused. “I think it was even *worse* than losing the arm, because at least that was interesting, from a medical perspective.”

Lord Ghan shivered. “I’m convinced I actually wet my pants, though Ru refuses to confirm my suspicions. It was quite dreadful.”

“I don’t know how you all withstood it,” Xian murmured. “I was in agony after only five strikes.”

Raoul nodded. “I confess, I was astonished at the pain, not just during the whipping, but afterwards, as well.”

Iason was silent, staring down at his plate. "I don't know what would have become of me, if Riki hadn't stepped in," he said finally.

"It was remarkably brave, that," Heiku asserted, and the others nodded their agreement.

As if on cue, Riki emerged from the bedroom at that very moment, looking sleepy and disoriented, his hair sticking out in every direction. His gaze was locked on Iason, as though no one else in the room even existed.

"And here he is, the man himself," Lord Am announced, holding up his glass. "A toast to Riki!"

"To Riki!" the Blondies all raised their glasses, startling him with their loud greeting.

The mongrel stood for a long moment, perplexed, staring first at Raoul and then at the others, and feeling, once again, as though he were still dreaming.

"Come here, love," Lord Mink said softly.

Wordlessly, Riki moved toward the Blondie and then settled onto his lap, getting comfortable as Iason wrapped his arms around him.

"Where's my kiss?" Iason teased, bending down to proffer a cheek.

Riki kissed him and then turned to regard Raoul again, surprised to find the Blondie looking at him with something almost like affection.

"You were very brave, Riki," Lord Am praised, his eyes shining with respect. "I fear I've misjudged you. From now on, I hope there shall be no more animosity between us. There will be none, at any rate, on my part."

"Cool," Riki replied, pausing for a moment before adding with a mischievous smile, "but I already knew I was awesome. Is there any more bacon?"



THE BLONDIES STAYED AT THE PENTHOUSE for several days as if by some unspoken understanding that they belonged together. The crowds that had waited outside Eos Tower for days eventually dissipated when it became apparent the Blondies were remaining in

seclusion.

One afternoon, everyone was gathered in the great hall, Blondies, pets, and eunuchs alike, when Riki suddenly pointed to Katze.

"Hey! I won that bet! That bet we made, remember? Ha ha! Your ass is *mine*!"

Katze scowled. "That shouldn't count. There were...extenuating circumstances."

"No way, you can't get out of it now! You made the bet! Paddle—I need a paddle!"

"I have one," Daryl announced, grinning. "I'll go get it."

Katze shot Daryl an angry look. "Traitor!"

"What's this?" Heiku asked, perking up.

"Katze's getting paddled," Riki announced gleefully. "He lost our bet."

"What bet was that?" Iason asked, amused by Riki's excitement and Katze's obvious mortification.

"He bet that I couldn't go one day without telling everyone what happened...that one day," he leaned closer, whispering, "you know, with Vosh."

At this, the other Blondies took interest.

"And what *did* happen, Iason?" Omaki pressed.

"Yes, Iason. Tell us," Heiku teased. "Although I'm not so sure Raoul wants to know."

Lord Am looked visibly annoyed at this comment, though he feigned disinterest, flipping through the Tanagura Quarterly.

Iason only smiled but said nothing.

Daryl came running back into the hall with the paddle, handing it to Riki with a delighted grin. "Let him really have it, Riki," he advised.

"Hey!" Katze protested, giving his lover a dark look.

"What? You *did* make the bet, Katze."

The other eunuchs nodded their agreement.

"Yes, you did," Ru confirmed.

Katze turned to Iason. "Please. Could you...intercede here? Otherwise I'll never have any authority."

"If you were foolish enough to make such a bet, you'll take what's coming to you," Lord Mink replied coolly.

Now Katze, who was usually rather calm and unaffected no matter what the circumstance, flushed a deep red.

Riki had already positioned himself on the edge of a divan, and pointed to his lap. "All right now. Time to take your punishment! And remember...pants *down*."

Mortified, Katze reluctantly rose to his feet and approached the mongrel, who was smiling at him smugly. "Can't we do this *privately*?" he whispered.

This was greeted with shouts of protest from the onlookers, who were all now interested in the unfolding drama.

Riki shrugged, grinning. "Guess not. You heard them. Come on now, stop dallying."

Iason smiled slightly at this, recognizing his own influence on Riki's word choice.

Annoyed, and completely humiliated, Katze unzipped and lowered his pants, reluctantly positioning himself over Riki's knees. The eunuchs and pets giggled at the sight of Katze displayed in such an undignified manner, and Riki simply enjoyed the beauty of the moment, twirling the paddle around in his hand and then patting it teasingly against the eunuch's ass. Aki and Suuki, who had been playing elsewhere in the penthouse, now came running into the great hall to see what the commotion was all about, and seemed, at first, a little uncertain about the situation, both of them far too familiar with the pain of a paddle to find Katze's predicament amusing.

"You're in for it now," Riki warned. "Now's payback, for all those times you tamed me."

"I was only doing my job," Katze argued.

"You didn't have to be so enthusiastic about it, though."

"Make sure you put your arm into it," Raoul advised, his legs crossed comfortably as he sipped some tea, his chair pushed close to the fire.

"Indeed I shall," Riki replied, again picking up on Iason's manner of speaking.

With that, he brought the paddle down with a mighty whack, eliciting more giggles and snickers. Katze did his best to remain quiet throughout his tortuous ordeal, but Riki proved to be quite an

effective disciplinarian when put to the test, giving him a paddling that pushed Katze to his very limits.

Wincing, the eunuch eventually could not help but utter a few small gasps and yelps, much to Riki's delight. "You're feeling that, I think?" he taunted. He gave him a few rather sadistic final whacks before letting him go, and Katze rose to his feet slowly, his face nearly as red as his ass.

"Well done," Omaki praised. "Who's next?"

"Yes, bring me that paddle," Heiku demanded, snapping his fingers. "I've got an idea for a game."

The other Blondies groaned at this.

"We hate your games, Heiku," Xian complained.

"Oh, come on. Loosen up a bit. This will be fun, I assure you."

"I'm not playing," Lord Am announced.

"Nor I," Iason clarified.

"You're all playing. Raoul, I'll even let you be first. Iason, have you a counting sphere?"

"I suppose I might. Not that I'm playing, mind you."

"Well, have someone get it. We need it to play the game."

"What exactly is the game, Heiku?" Lord Ghan asked, intrigued.

"It's a paddling game. We'll spin the counting sphere to determine how many strikes Raoul gets. He can choose whoever he wants to paddle, and after that, whoever he paddles gets a turn."

Raoul, despite himself, warmed up to the idea of a spanking game, immediately deciding who was going to get the force of his arm.

"Very well. Toma, can you bring a counting sphere?"

"I don't know where it is," Toma replied.

"I'll get one," Daryl offered, jumping up.

"As I said, I'm not playing the game," Iason repeated.

"Yes, you are," Raoul countered, "because I'm going to paddle *you*."

The others all laughed loudly at this—everyone, of course, except Lord Mink.

"Come on, Iason. You can take it. Then you can choose someone to paddle," Omaki encouraged.

Iason's gaze instinctively shifted to Lord Chi, who withered a little

under his scrutiny.

“This is a silly game,” Megala announced hopefully.

“It’s a splendid game! Ah! The counting sphere!” Heiku took the sphere from Daryl, who had come running back into the hall with it, and gave it to Raoul. “Go ahead, Raoul. Give it a spin.”

The Blondie did so, and the sphere, floating in midair, spun about madly, beeping all the while. Then it abruptly stopped, projecting a glowing hologram of the number 3.

A bit disappointed, but determined to make every strike count, Raoul turned to Iason. “Right. On your feet, then.”

Lord Mink, deciding then that he could weather three strikes easily enough, obliged him, turning around to offer himself.

“Lean over a bit. Hold onto that chair,” Raoul ordered.

“Give him a good one, Raoul!” Riki encouraged, which earned him a dark look from his Blondie Master.

“You can count on *that*.” With both hands firmly holding the paddle, Lord Am took a mighty swing, giving Iason a rather loud whack square on the ass. It stung dreadfully, and the Blondie bit his lip, though managed not to give any other sign of his discomfort. After receiving two more whacks, Iason turned around, holding out his hand for the paddle.

“Who do you choose, Iason?” Heiku asked. “Megala, is it?”

“No,” Iason replied. “I choose Raoul.”

Lord Am looked so astonished that everyone in the great hall broke out into wild, feet-stomping laughter at his expression.

“A wise choice! Then, spin the sphere,” Heiku directed, somehow taking it upon himself, as he always did, to direct the flow of the game.

Lord Mink did so, smiling when the sphere stopped at 6. “Your turn, Raoul. Turn around and bend over.”

Yui kept his hand over his mouth to keep from giggling aloud as the great Blondie dutifully positioned himself for his paddling, looking now altogether disgusted with Heiku’s paddling game. Iason gave him all six strikes full force, and afterwards, Raoul could not help but give his ass a little rub, wishing for a bit of ice to cool his punished flesh.

He took the paddle from Iason and then turned to Omaki, who had been laughing rather loudly and obnoxiously the entire time. “You,” he announced, pointing at him with the paddle.

“Oh, if you insist,” Lord Ghan grinned, happily jumping to his feet. He rather liked getting a good paddling, and though he would have preferred it coming from Iason, he would definitely take it from Raoul.

“You won’t be smiling when I’m through with you,” Lord Am warned, giving the sphere an angry spin.

This time the spinner stopped at 9, and Omaki looked a little less excited about what was in store for him, though he got into position, gripping the back of what had now officially become the paddling game chair as Raoul laid into him.

“Ow,” he yelped, after the third whack. “You needn’t strike *quite* that hard, Raoul!”

“It’s not as amusing when you’re actually taking the paddle, is it?” Raoul taunted.

Lord Sami snorted at this, finding the game, up to this point, utterly delightful. And Aki and Suuki, now feeling safe that the paddling “game” was restricted to the Blondie Masters, were equally enthralled with the game, giggling furiously and jumping up and down with excitement.

After six more merciless strikes, Omaki felt a bit angry and decided to take his wrath out on Xian, who had offered annoying, unhelpful comments throughout his ordeal, such as “Omaki squeals like a female pet,” and “Clenching your ass like that won’t help!”

Lord Sami took seven whacks with the paddle at his hand, his enthusiasm for the game now having been rather spoiled, though the eunuchs and pets continued to be delighted with the game.

“Very good,” Heiku announced joyfully. “And who is next, Xian?”

“I’ll tell you who’s next. *You*. You, for this ridiculous game.”

The other Blondies all cheered at this, and when Lord Sami spun a 16 on the sphere, the entire great hall was in an uproar, laughing and clapping at Lord Quiahtenon’s fate. Aki and Suuki were so excited, they ran sporadically around the group, yelling, “Sixteen! Sixteen!”

“The sphere’s defective!” Heiku protested. “It can’t roll a 16!”

“And why not?” Omaki demanded. “16 is a number.”

“It’s supposed to be one through ten!”

“You didn’t specify a 10 count sphere,” Iason pointed out. “It’s a 20-count, and the rest of us took the risk of a high number. Don’t tell me you intend to back out, when this whole frightfully silly game was *your* idea?”

Heiku frowned, and, seeing that the entire room was against him, grumpily moved into position. He took 16 surprisingly hard whacks at Xian’s hand, with everyone there shouting the count after each resounding whack, his face deepening to a dark scarlet by the end of his paddling.

“Who’s next, who’s next?” Aki shouted.

Although Heiku was tempted to pay Xian back for his rather brutal enthusiasm, he was privately a little afraid the Blondie would give him *another* turn under the paddle, and his ass was burning so dreadfully that he didn’t dare take the risk.

“This was a stupid game,” he muttered, sitting down as gingerly as he could.

“I hate to break up all the fun,” Lord Chi said, rising to his feet nervously, “but I think it’s time I returned to my suite.”

“You lucked out, Megala,” Raoul remarked, arching a brow. “You should have taken a turn under the paddle for withholding more information from us about the hidden passageways in the penthouse.”

“Perhaps we should *force* him to take a turn,” Xian suggested.

“An excellent idea,” Lord Am agreed.

Megala blushed, not daring to meet Raoul’s gaze.

Lord Ghan laughed. “I don’t think it would have quite the effect you’re hoping for, Raoul. I rather think he’d *enjoy* being paddled by you.”

The others all snickered at this, and, upon seeing that Lord Am was not going to seriously carry out his threat, Megala turned to Iason with a slight bow. “Iason. Thank you for your...hospitality.”

“Yes, it’s been a delight,” Lord Sami teased. “We so enjoyed being publicly whipped, lectured by the Headmaster and then paddled. That’s a party to remember. We shall have to do this again on a regular basis.”

"We *will* be seeing each other on a regular basis, it seems," Omaki pointed out. "Once a week, anyway, to be lectured to death by Headmaster Konami."

"Don't remind me," Raoul groaned.

Lord Ghan, wincing a little. "I believe I shall take my leave, as well. I'm sure Iason is quite ready to have his penthouse back to himself again."

"Nonsense. You may all stay as long as you like," Lord Mink protested politely, though privately he was looking forward to being alone with Riki.

"When will you come back?" Aki asked, looking a little sad.

"I shall come by every day, just to see you," the Blondie answered, bending down to give him a kiss. "And I expect you to be on your best behavior for your new Guardian."

Aki nodded, relieved with Omaki's promise to visit each day. As much as Suuki helped relieve some of his anxiety about his new home, he was still a bit uncertain about what things would be like under his Guardian's rule.

The Blondies were all on their feet, realizing that it was time to depart. None of them were especially looking forward to facing the scrutiny of the Elite community after being so humiliated at the Public Whippings, but they realized they could not hide in Iason's penthouse forever. Additionally, there was work to be done, for none of them had attended to any of their duties or enterprises for nearly a week. Their eunuchs and pets were all sorry to see the "party" come to an end, but at the same time, they knew it would be good to have the full attention of their Masters in the privacy and familiarity of their own homes.

So, the Blondies and their households gathered up their gift baskets and took their leave, finally giving Iason some peace, for though he was never anything but the most gracious host, the truth of the matter was that he actually preferred the quiet and intimacy of his home without the presence of any guests. He was also anxious for some alone time with Riki, for they had both been too uncomfortable from their injuries to engage in any sort of real sexual contact, and he was now aching to have his pet in his arms.

Aki and Suuki ran off to play in Aki's room, and Iason immediately made for the Master bedroom, giving Riki a smoldering look.

The mongrel seemed to guess his thoughts, following him wordlessly to the bedroom, where they both undressed and then got into bed.

"My precious Riki," Iason sighed, pulling him close. "It feels good to have you in my arms again, just like this."

Riki closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of Iason's naked body against his own. "It does," he agreed.

"What you did for me," Lord Mink began, and then stopped, unable to find the words to express the emotion that suddenly flooded through him. He touched his fingers to the lash-marks on Riki's back. They were now healing nicely, though they would never fully disappear.

"Thanks for not making me go through more Acceleration," Riki whispered. "I know you don't care for the scars."

"You quite misjudge me," Iason answered. "I love these scars, and would not have them removed for all the world. They are a permanent reminder to me of your sacrifice...and your submission to me."

"My submission? Is that what you think?" Riki frowned. "Iason, I didn't go under the whip out of...some sort of subservience to you."

"No?"

"Of course not. Don't you know why I did it?"

"Tell me," the Blondie said eagerly.

"Surely you know. I did it out of love."

"Do you really mean that, Riki?"

"I just said so, didn't I?"

Speechless, Iason pushed him back onto the bed. He kissed him in a way he never had before—or at least it seemed so, to Riki: his lips lingered over the mongrel's, tenderly coaxing gasps and sighs from him, communicating, in a manner words never could, the Blondie's deep-felt passion for him.

"Shit," Riki said hoarsely, "you're on fire tonight, Iason."

"I've missed that, so very much."

"Me, too. But at the moment my cock is about to burst." He took Iason's hand, guiding him to his erection and groaning when the

Blondie gripped him. “Ahh! Your hand is so warm. But I have to tell you—I don’t think I’m going to last more than a few seconds, here.”

“No matter. I intend to make love to you, over and over—yes, that’s it,” Iason encouraged gently, as Riki ejaculated in his hand. He used the semen to lubricate his own organ, pushing the mongrel’s legs apart with his knees and entering him from the front.

Lord Mink found that, like Riki, he had gone far too long without release to prolong matters for any length of time. He gave into his desire, giving his pet a brief but very sweet fucking before almost immediately climaxing. Afterwards it was only a matter of minutes before they were both ready to begin again.

Iason, for the first time in his life, felt pure joy. He had Riki back in his arms—his pet, his extraordinary, passionate little mongrel, at last tamed, and finally, by Jupiter’s decree, to be his forever. He savored the moment, whispering Riki’s name over and over as he pressed kisses all over his body, feeling as though he could not possibly be happier than he was that night.

They loved each other for hours, each feeling as though he could not quite get enough of the other, and neither one of them wanting to leave the bed, even for a moment, as they shared an intimacy that far exceeded anything either had experienced before. Their hearts were as entangled as their bodies, and their minds were united as one.



SOME DAYS HAD GONE BY, AND THINGS HAD SHIFTED back into a state of normalcy. Riki was bored, for Iason had shut himself up in the Library to get some work finished, and so he watched Daryl at the computer, where he was setting up Aki’s signature access profile.

“What are you doing, exactly?” he asked.

“Just inputting Aki into the system, so that the doors will open for him.”

“Oh yeah?” Riki suddenly looked interested, peering over Daryl’s shoulder at the computer screen. “Am I in there?”

“Daryl!” Toma called, from the guest wing. “Can you help me with something?”

"I'll be right back," Daryl said. "Don't even think of messing with your profile, Riki. I'll be sure to check it as soon as I get back."

"Sheesh. Give me some credit," he shot back. "I'm not *that* stupid."

"Hmmm." Daryl gave him a suspicious look before rushing out of the great hall.

Now a mischievous smile curled the mongrel's lips as he studied the computer screen. "Let's see," he whispered.

"What are doing?" Aki whispered back, excited. "You're going to get in trouble!"

"Don't worry. This will be great." He found what he was looking for, and with a tap on the computer screen, made a slight alteration to Iason's access profile. He looked at Aki, raising his eyebrows and then pressing a finger to his lips.

Aki put his hand over his mouth, giggling. Though he wasn't entirely sure what Riki had done, he knew that whatever it was, it was sure to be entertaining. Aki had come to almost worship Riki, and the mongrel, surprisingly, found that he liked the boy's attention. He'd developed a nightly routine of telling him stories about his life back in Midas, which Aki eagerly listened to, interrupting him constantly with questions, which Riki found flattering. It was fun to have someone "look up" to him, and in some ways, Aki reminded him of how he had once been, as a boy.

Daryl returned to the hall, narrowing his eyes when he saw Riki's grin. He examined the mongrel's security profile, but finding nothing altered, proceeded to shut down the program, retiring to his room.

Riki waited for a few moments before calling for Iason, warning Aki not to give away his secret. "We're going to play a little joke on Iason," he explained.

Aki struggled to keep a straight face, delighted with the idea of playing a "joke" on his Guardian, though he had no idea what it was.

Annoyed because he had specifically forbade interruption, Lord Mink emerged from the Library, standing in the doorway with one hand on his hip. "What is it, Riki? I told you I was not to be bothered."

"Oh! Sorry. I just wanted to tell you, that one vase—that orange one in your room? The...Spaghetti thing? I broke it. Sorry about that."

For a moment, Lord Mink said nothing, his face darkening. He was speechless, striding toward his bedroom. Surely, Riki hadn't truly broken another priceless Vergatti! He was so preoccupied with his vase that he failed to respond in time when the door to his bedroom didn't hum open, as it usually did on his approach. He collided into the door, and the expression of utter surprise on the great Blondie's face was so funny that Aki fell onto the floor, giggling hysterically.

Lord Mink spun around. "Riki!" he shouted, furious.

Riki grinned and then darted out of the hall, running down the guest wing. Iason paused only long enough to manually open the door and check on the status of his vase. Then, seeing that the Vergatti was still intact, he smiled, relaxing a bit and enjoying his pet's joke. He took off after him, catching up with him in the pool area and grabbing him from behind, as Riki squealed, laughing.

Iason held him tightly pulling him hard against his body. "Naughty pet," he whispered, though couldn't help but smile. He was delighted with Riki's playfulness—and of course, utterly relieved his Vergatti hadn't truly been destroyed.

"That was great!" Riki proclaimed. "You should have seen the look on your face! You sure interfaced with that door! *Ka-boom!* Ha ha ha!"

"How shall I punish you?" Iason asked, nibbling his earlobe. "I can't quite decide."

"Oh, come on. I took the whip for you, I ought to have immunity from all future punishment!"

At this, Lord Mink closed his eyes, suddenly overcome with emotion. "Oh, Riki. You are so precious to me."

"If I'm so precious," Riki challenged, "how about you get me that Zerovian like you promised?"

"We shall go out today and you may pick one out, if you like," the Blondie promised.

"Really? Awesome! I want...a silver one!"

Iason kissed his neck, his hands descending slowly to the mongrel's slim hips. "But first, get undressed. Let's take a dip in the pool."

"Yeah, okay," Riki replied, breathing a little harder when the

Blondie moved his hand suggestively over his groin.

In the next moment they were both in the pool, enjoying the warm water and the intimacy of being naked and wet together. Iason cornered Riki, pushing him up against the side of the pool, his erection hard against the mongrel's thigh.

"You look sexy when you're wet," Riki remarked, his voice husky from lust.

Lord Mink answered this by prodding his mouth open with a forceful, deliberately languid kiss, his tongue twirling round and round, his hands moving slowly down Riki's body, under the water. "I love you with my whole heart," he proclaimed. "And I shall have you with me now, forever. And now even Jupiter respects you. How does it feel to be a *special* A-class pet?"

Riki shrugged. "I actually don't get what the big deal is all about. I mean, nothing's really changed for me. I'm a pet. I'm...nobody."

The Blondie frowned at this, tilting Riki's chin up with a finger when the mongrel looked down. "You're my pet," he replied softly. "And that makes you somebody, especially to me."

"Uh huh."

Lord Mink studied him, feeling suddenly, inexplicably, sad. "What is it, Riki?"

"It's just...well, you wouldn't understand. I want you to look at me, not just as a pet, but as a lover. As a man...in my own right."

"But I do, Riki," Iason protested. "You don't think I do?"

"You just told me I was somebody because I was your pet. That says it all, right there."

The Blondie grew increasingly downcast as he considered this, noting the faraway, forlorn look in Riki's eyes. There was something in the mongrel's expression he had never seen before, a quality he could not quite put his finger on, but which struck him as especially troubling. It almost seemed as if his pet now carried an air of defeat and resignation, where the fire of defiance had once been. The fire had gone out, and now there was only brokenness and quiet submission.

Though Iason had fought for over two years to invoke that submission—indeed, it was hard-won—he found that, when faced

with the reality of how such submission might alter Riki, he did not especially like what he saw.

"I didn't mean it like that," he protested gently.

"Would you still love me if I wasn't your pet?"

"Riki, I will always love you. I love you, even though doing so nearly cost me everything."

At this, Riki softened a bit, smiling. "Yeah, okay. I see your point."

"Good." The Blondie kissed him again, this time a little more passionately, almost desperately.

He made love to Riki there in the water, encouraging his sex cries with his own moans, and feeling as though he was straining toward something he could not quite reach, even when his rapture spilled out from him in erratic bursts of almost unfathomable sweetness. Iason could not quite shake the sorrow that had somehow spoiled his good mood; it snaked its way insidiously into his heart, and from there, spread through his entire being.



AS PROMISED, LORD MINK TOOK RIKI OUT that very afternoon to purchase his new vehicle, smiling at the mongrel's transparent excitement as he ran all the way around the Zerovian hovercraft, peering into the windows. The merchant was, in truth, equally excited, for it was not every day that the pricey vehicle actually left his showroom, and on top of that, it was being sold to none other than the famous pet of Iason Mink. Already the mere presence of the prestigious Head of the Syndicate, making his first appearance in Tanagura since the Public Whippings—and with his pet, no less—had generated a crowd of onlookers, who watched the transaction through the window with interest and not a little envy.

"An *excellent* choice!" the merchant exclaimed, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief and feeling as though he might pass out. "Nothing but the best for Lord Mink's famous mongrel, I see!"

Odi and Ayuda had both accompanied them and seemed extraordinarily nervous about all the attention they were generating,

refusing to let anyone enter the shop while Iason and Riki were within. But there wasn't much they could do when it was time to leave. There was no way to get the vehicle out of the showroom other than to drive it out, and so, finally, the immense sliding glass doors were opened so that they could depart. However, the moment the doors hummed open, the crowds moved into the store.

Their path out of the store was thus blocked, and Riki, annoyed, got out of his vehicle to confront the crowd.

"Hey! Move out of the way!" he yelled. "And don't touch the vehicle!"

Iason, who was still in the vehicle, frowned and was just about to scold Riki when an Elite stepped forward, his hand on a youngster's shoulder who was at his side.

"Excuse me, Sir Riki? Could I take a holo-pic of you with my Yeri? He's quite excited about you, you see," the Elite explained with a laugh, gesturing to the boy who was now regarding the mongrel with wide, awe-struck eyes.

"Well, I suppose that would be okay," Riki answered, admittedly flattered by the request.

They took the holo-pic and the boy, Yeri, eagerly held out the disk case to him. "Will you sign my case too, Sir Riki?"

"I guess," the mongrel said, standing up a little taller.

Lord Mink watched this exchange from inside the Zerovian, pleased with the attention his pet was getting and the polite way he was handling it. For the first time, Iason had allowed him to leave the penthouse without his chains, wearing only his collar, and the Blondie couldn't help but notice how handsome and proud he looked without them, so much like he once had, when Iason had first met him. He realized then that whenever Riki wore the chains, he didn't hold his head up, as he did now.

Ayuda and Odi, were both agitated, still trying, unsuccessfully, to move the crowd out of the way so that the vehicle could be driven out of the store.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, Guy was standing before Riki, with a laser pointed directly at him.

"This is for Kei," he snarled.

Riki, though surprised, hadn't lost his street instincts and managed to dodge aside quick as lightning, the laser beam barely missing him.

In the next instant, Guy cried out, falling to his knees, blood dripping down between his legs. Then he fell over onto the floor.

Ayuda and Odi had both fired on him. The crowd, panicking, scattered, screams echoing inside the high-ceilinged building.

Lord Mink leapt out of the vehicle, alarmed. "Riki!"

But the mongrel was on the ground, at Guy's side, trying desperately to stop the blood that was oozing out of his old lover's chest. He felt as though the past were repeating itself: just as he had held Kei's hand when he died, he now held Guy's.

Guy opened his mouth, but was unable to speak.

"Guy!" Riki cried, shaking his head. "Oh, Guy!" The mongrel was weeping, staring down at the face of his old lover.

"Riki," Guy gasped. "Why? Why did you kill Kei?"

"It was an accident! I didn't mean to hurt him, Guy. I swear! I would never do that to you!"

Guy struggled to hang onto his life, his breathing shallow. "Accident?"

"Yes! It was an accident!" Riki clutched his hand, pleading with him not to die. "Hang on! Help is coming!"

Guy squeezed his hand, looking into his eyes, and in that moment Riki thought he saw a hint of forgiveness. Then the look faded, along with the man, who died as he watched helplessly, in horror and despair.

He wept uncontrollably, not even aware of what was going on around him. When Lord Mink finally knelt down and tried to persuade him to stand up, he could only throw himself in the Blondie's arms, his body shaking as he sobbed. Iason comforted him as best he could, holding him close, but he was perplexed by the pet's emotion, suddenly feeling as though, perhaps, he did not truly know Riki's heart at all.

Riki pulled away, looking up at him, the tears still streaming down his cheeks. "Please. Can we take him away from here? They'll come and take him...I know what they do to mongrels...they'll throw him

into Manatung Bay! Please. He deserves better than that.”

“Very well.” Iason slipped off his cloak, wrapping it around Guy’s lifeless form, and picked him up, lying him down in the back of the vehicle.

Riki was too distraught to drive, and sat in the back with Guy.

“Where should we take him? Back to Ceres?” Iason asked, as he started the generator.

“No. He should be...with Kei. Let’s take him to the ocean, where you found me...that day.”

Lord Mink nodded, and they made the journey in silence, but for the mongrel’s weeping. When they got to the ocean, Iason carried the body to the water’s edge.

Riki held out his arms. “Give him to me now.”

The Blondie placed Guy in his arms, and Riki walked with him a few steps into the sea, his heart heavy.

“I’m so sorry, Guy,” he whispered. “But you and Kei...perhaps you can find one another, now.”

With that, he gently dropped him into the water, watching for a while until he could no longer see his face. Then he turned and slowly made his way back to the beach, where Iason stood, waiting.

“You’re cold,” the Blondie observed with concern, putting his arms around him. “We need to get you someplace warm.” Iason realized suddenly that they were not too far from his villa, a place he had never before taken his pet. Now, he realized, was the perfect time to go there.

The mongrel went limp in his arms, and Lord Mink, with one easy movement, picked him up and carried him to the hovercraft, carefully setting him down in the front seat. He had never seen his pet quite so distraught, and he found he could hardly bear it. He couldn’t help but wonder about Riki’s feelings for Guy, and his reaction to his old lover’s death.

Within moments they were at the villa. Iason carried him inside, pleased and relieved to see the place was in perfect condition, though this hardly came as any real surprise. He kept the villa well-stocked, and had it cleaned every week, despite the fact that he rarely spent time there.

He took Riki into the bedroom and undressed him, drying his wet body off and then helping him get settled under the warm, down-filled comforter that covered the bed. Then he started the fire there in the room. He slipped under the covers with him, putting his arms around him and simply holding him, while the mongrel continued to weep.

They lay together thus for a long time, saying nothing.

Finally, Iason could not help but ask that which was weighing on his heart. "Did you love him so much?"

Riki swallowed, closing his eyes. "It's not that. It's just so very sad. Guy...and Kei. And I feel like...part of me just died. We grew up together, you know. He was a good friend, even before we became lovers. Everything got all fucked up. I feel like...my whole world, everything I once knew, is gone now."

Lord Mink was silent, reflecting on this. He continued to brood, even after Riki had drifted off to sleep in his arms. He was thinking, too, about the comments he had made earlier that day, in the pool.

With a heavy heart, the great Blondie came to a decision, one that he would never have believed, before that day, he would even consider.



WHEN RIKI WOKE, HE FOUND IASON GONE. He looked around, disoriented, wondering where he was. Then, he remembered what had happened to Guy. He felt numb, as if perhaps he had only dreamed about the shooting and Guy's death. He could still see his old lover's face as it slowly descended into the cold Amoian sea, and he shuddered, remembering then a similar scene, only a few days before, when he had carried Kei to the same watery grave.

He sat up, looking toward the bright, well-tended fire that crackled and popped in such a comforting way, in one corner of the room. He then remembered that Iason had brought him to this place the day before, though he hadn't said anything about where they were. He remembered, too, that the Blondie had stayed with him all through the previous day as well as that night, holding him.

It was snowing outside, but Riki could see that it was now day. Had he really slept all that time?

Realizing he had a number of pressing needs to attend to, he made a prompt visit to the bath hall, where he freshened up. He found his clothes lying out by the fire, and so he dressed, and then went in search of Iason.

He walked slowly around the building, marveling at its opulence, but nothing could have prepared him for what he encountered next, in the center of the palatial dwelling. It was a circular enclosure, walled off from the rest of the villa by glass. Within was a garden—an immense, indoor, walk-through garden, filled with weeping cherry trees. He searched for the entrance and finally found it, and then stepped inside.

He noticed an immediate change in the temperature—it was warmer. Overhead was a roof of arching glass, so that the entire garden was self-contained. Some sort of breeze had been artificially generated, and the cherry blossoms swirled around him as he walked.

The garden was so beautiful that the mongrel was truly overwhelmed. For a few minutes, he managed to forget about his heartache and what had happened the previous day. He marveled at the extraordinary sanctuary, his throat constricting as he recognized the Blondie's distinctive touch, everywhere he looked.

No one but Iason could create such an oasis, defying even the cruel Amoian winter with his gardening artistry: in this carefully orchestrated space, it was not winter, but spring.

Lord Mink was sitting on a bench near a small pond, and he smiled sadly as Riki approached. "Feeling better?"

"This is...amazing. Hey! There are birds in here! Pretty yellow and blue ones!"

"Yes, those are very rare. They're imported from Aristia."

"Where are we exactly?"

"This is my villa."

"Wow. I can't believe this is...*inside* the building." A beautiful violet butterfly landed briefly on Riki's arm and then fluttered away.

"A butterfly! It was *purple*. Did you see that?"

"Riki. Come sit next to me."

"All right." The mongrel sat down on the bench beside him, beneath the cherry tree. "Why didn't you bring me here before?"

"I'm not sure," Iason replied.

"I love it."

The Blondie sighed. "Riki, I so want you to be happy."

"Huh? Hey! I just saw...a *red* butterfly! I've never seen one of those before!" He jumped up and started after it, but was stopped by Iason, who grabbed his arm and stood up.

"Riki, I'm trying to tell you something."

"Um, okay." Riki gazed up at him, his dark eyes wide.

Lord Mink struggled with his emotions, finding what he was about to do suddenly almost physically painful. "I want you to be happy," he repeated. "Because I *do* love you. And not just because you are my pet. Because you are Riki, who I love with my entire being. And so, my love, I am going to give you what you have asked me for all along: your freedom."

Riki was so astounded by this announcement that he could only stare back in disbelief.

"You can...go, if you want. Back to Ceres. Wherever you need to go, to be happy."

"Iason," he breathed. "You're truly releasing me?"

"I am," the Blondie replied sadly.

At that moment, Riki felt as though the chains that had bound him to Iason had suddenly fallen away. Now, all that kept him standing there was his love for the great Blondie, a love that, he knew, was far stronger than any chains.

"What makes me happy," Riki replied levelly, "is that you are willing to set me free. But Iason, where would I go? I belong with you. I love you, and I want to be with you."

"Oh Riki," Iason said, his voice cracking with emotion even as his eyes glistened with tears. "Do you mean it? Do you?"

"I told you so, didn't I?"

"But, understand, love, if you stay with me, you must stay as my pet. Jupiter wouldn't have it any other way."

Riki smiled. "I know. But I'm a special A-class pet, right?"

Lord Mink embraced him then, holding him so tightly that Riki, at



© Iason and Riki ©
Art by Tata

length, was forced to protest.

“Help. I’m being squeezed to death by a deviant Blondie.”

“I’m sorry,” Iason answered, immediately loosening his hold. “I am just...you’ve made me so happy, Riki. Then you’re truly going to stay with me?”

“Yes,” Riki answered, with a saucy smile. “As long as you promise to make me breakfast.”

The cherry blossoms swirled around them as they embraced again, their kiss whispering more intimate terms of their love, a love that was now given freely by both—without hesitation, restraint, or persuasion—nor spoiled by selfish wanting, given freely out of selfless sacrifice and caring: perfect, as much as anything can be perfect in an imperfect, wasteland-weary world, and healing, like the comforting warmth of a beautiful dream.

This Concludes Taming Riki Volume I.

An *Expanded* Guide to Kira Takenouchi's
Taming Riki

With Illustrations by Ulla Nissinen



❖ Characters ❖

The House of Mink



Iason Mink

A Blondie, Iason is Head of the Syndicate, reporting directly to Jupiter.

At the helm of Tanagura's prosperous trade enterprise, the Syndicate, Iason supervises the export of pets to the border planets and beyond and oversees the pet auctions on Amoi. He is the Prefect of Eos and also manages the underground Black Market serving Ceres—the slum area of Midas where non-citizens (mongrels) reside.

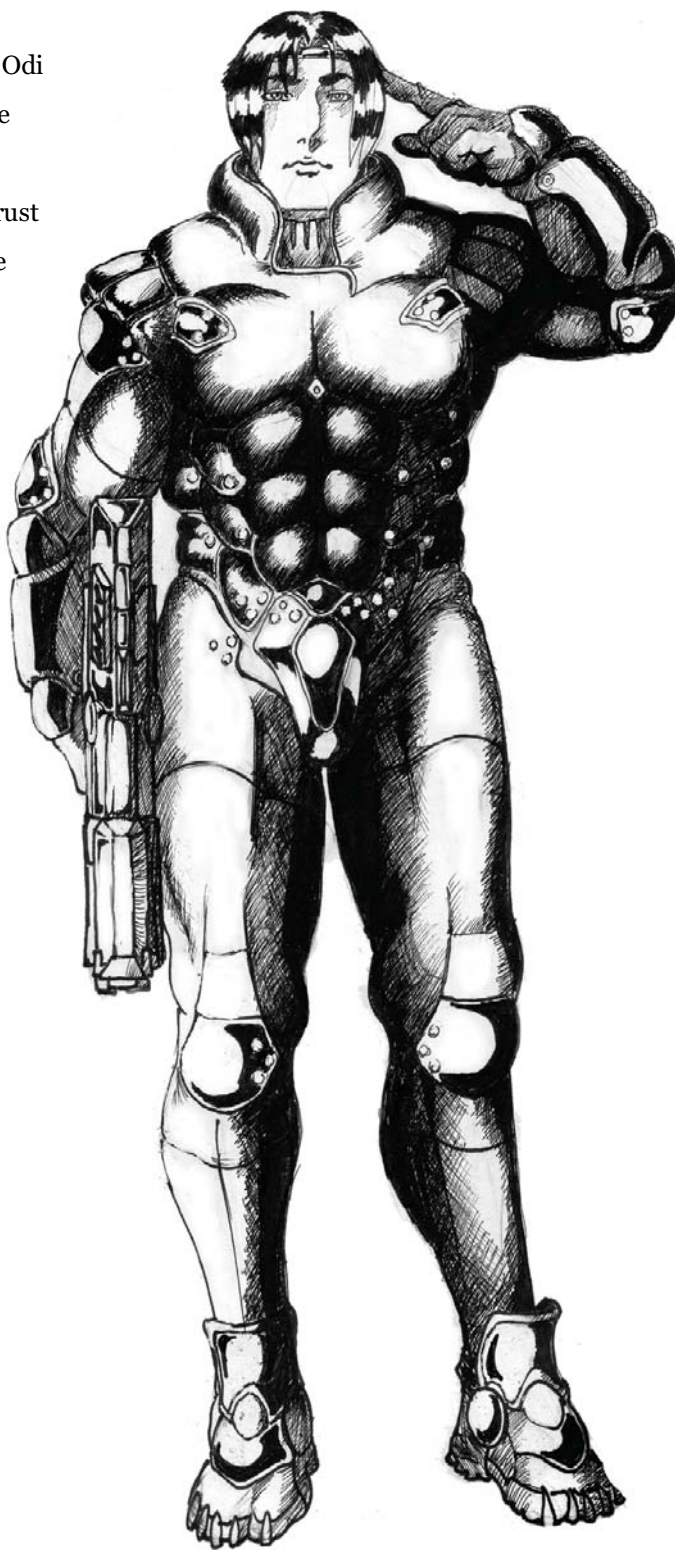
**Riki the Dark**

A mongrel, Iason's pet, and former leader of Bison—a notorious gang in Ceres.

Known as the "Prince of Midas," Riki was abandoned by his mother when he was very young and quickly learned to fend for himself on the wild streets of the slums.

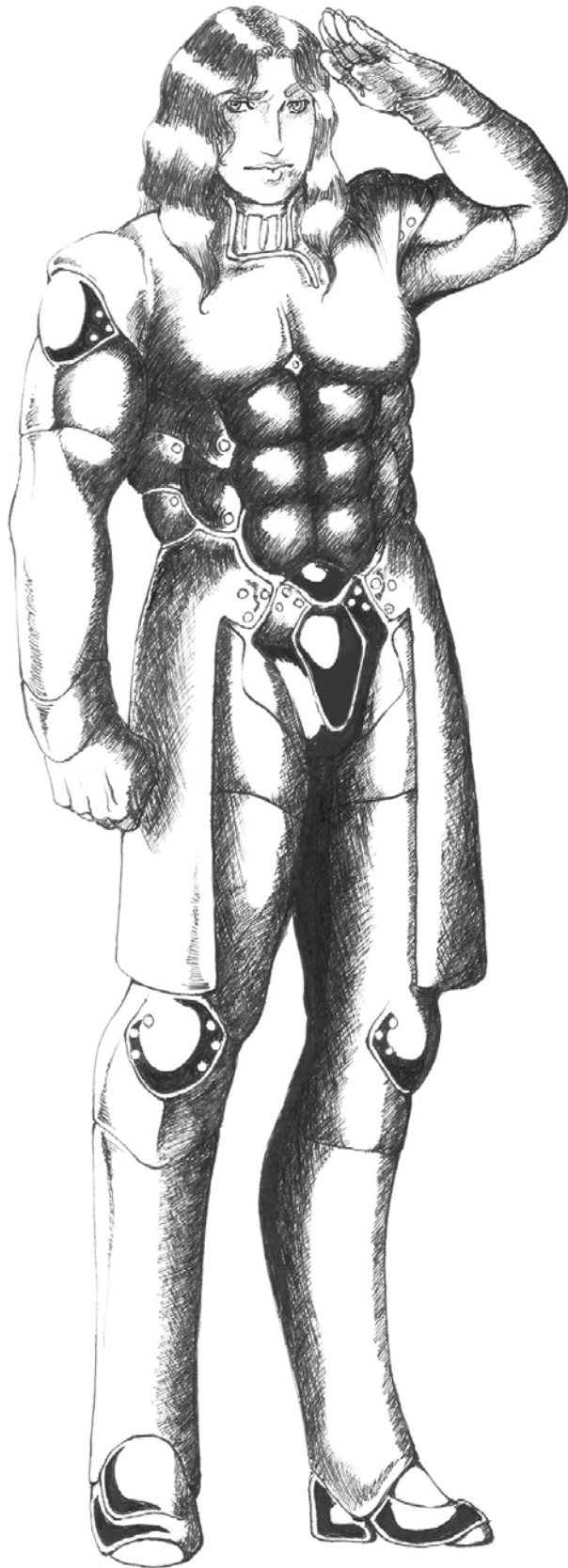
Odi

Iason's Head of Security, Odi is a native of Midas whose keen observation skills, intellect and general distrust of everyone make him the ideal bodyguard.



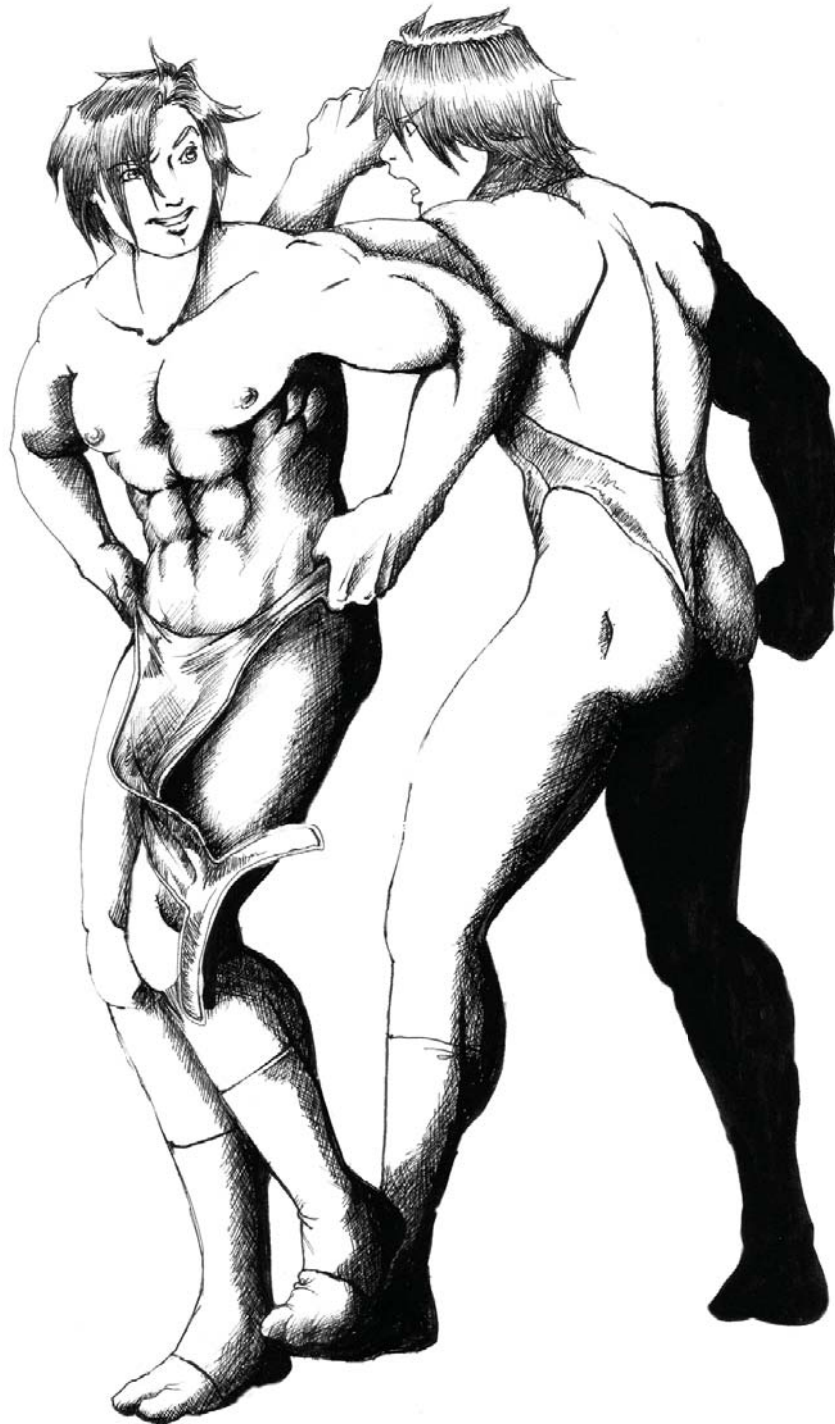
Ayuda

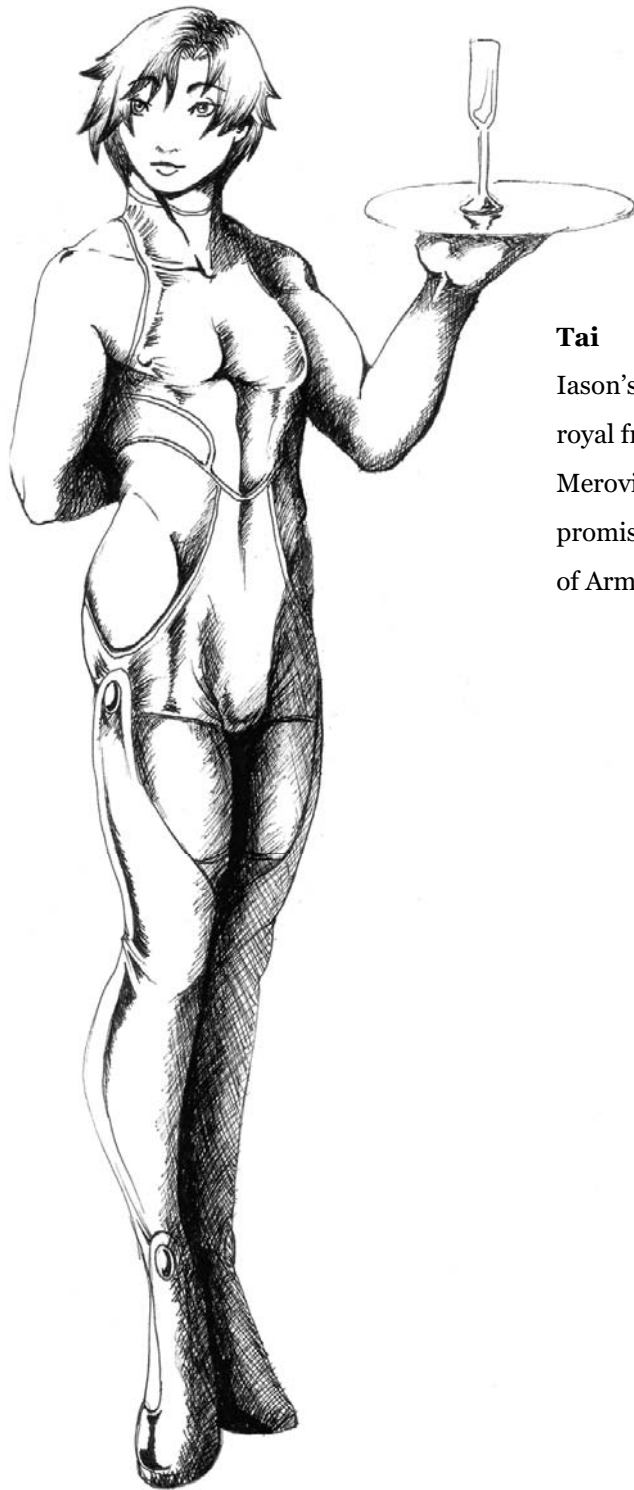
Iason's personal bodyguard, Ayuda is astute, vigilant, strong, dependable and very loyal. He would not hesitate to put his own life on the line to protect his charge.



Askel and Freyn

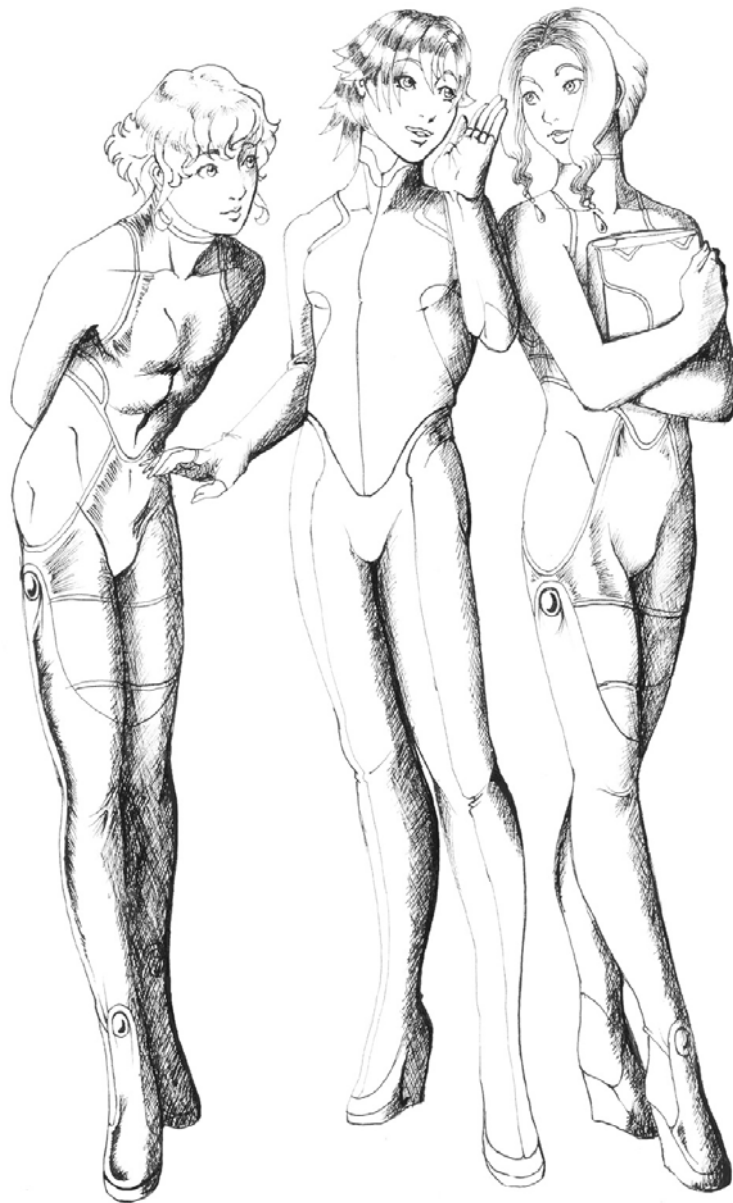
Askel (left) and Freyn (right) are fraternal twins from Midas who work as Iason's bodyguards.





Tai

Iason's chef. An Aristian royal from the House of Merovia, he was at one time promised to the priesthood of Armah.

**Toma**

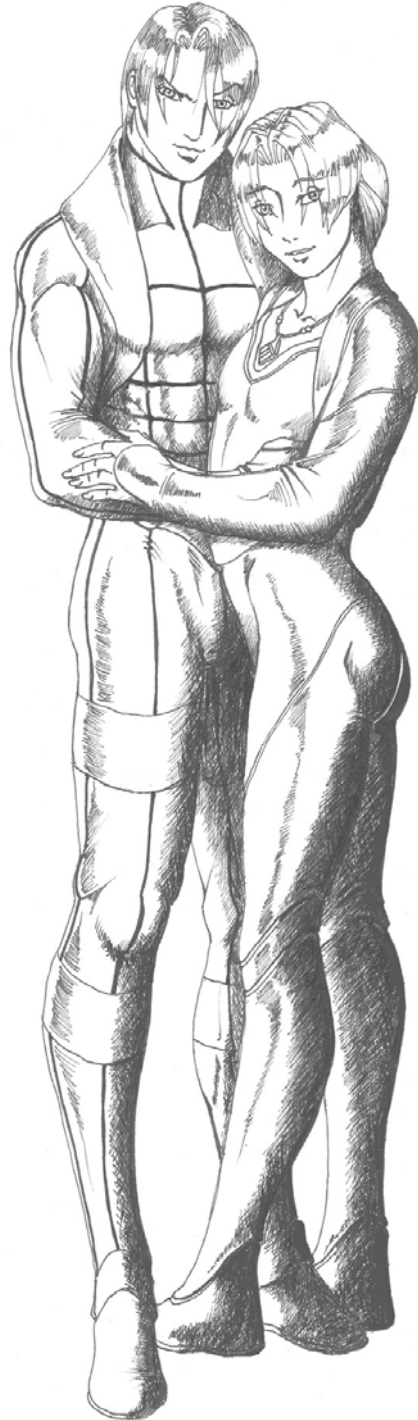
Xian Sami's former attending servant, Toma eventually replaces Juthian at the Mink household. Pictured (right) with Sarius (middle) and Ru (left).

Katze

Iason's former servant, Katze (left) is a eunuch who runs the underground Black Market that serves the slums of Midas and the border planets.

Daryl

Iason's attending servant. Daryl (right) was once the servant of Elusius Puck, a notorious Blondie known for his cruelty to his servants and pets.



The House of Ghan



Omaki Ghan

A Blondie. Omaki (left) is the Prefect of Apatia, a province located in Midas. He is also the proprietor of the Taming Tower. Omaki is famous for courting to the tastes of more deviant Blondies.

Aki

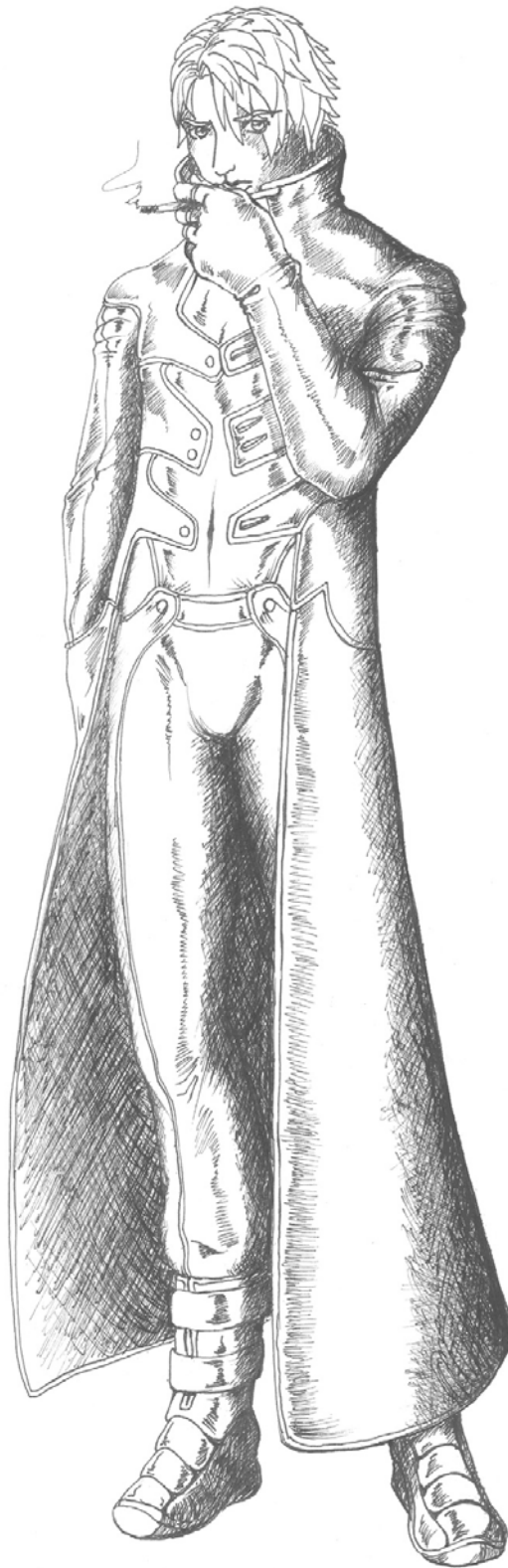
Aki (right) is a young orphan Omaki is grooming to one day become his pet.

Ru

Omaki's attending servant. Ru has been with him for seven years, since the age of nine. Ru is at the top of the social world for his caste, along with Sarius, Heiku's head servant. He is an excellent cook (albeit one with a short temper).

Kahlan

A 17-year old messenger from the Aristian House of Tuhn who eventually comes to serve as Omaki's assistant. His family was slaughtered in the Aristian massacres.



**Enyu**

A male pet given to Iason by Jupiter, Enyu is a Xeronian with a 5-day rutting cycle beginning on the new moon of every lunar month.

The House of Am

**Raoul Am**

A Blondie. Raoul is the former lover of Jason Mink and Tanagura's most respected artist. As a disciplinarian, Raoul is also a crowd favorite at public whippings.

Yui

A eunuch. Yui is Raoul's loyal and obedient attending servant. He is pictured holding Pixie, a Xeronian feline that was given to him by Raoul.



The House of Xuuju



Yousi Xuuju

A Blondie. Once an extremely brilliant Syndicate apprentice, Yousi fell from grace when he very unwisely claimed Jupiter could be overthrown. As punishment, Jupiter tampered with his mind and confiscated all his assets (with the exception of his servants and his pet).

Yousi runs the Bondage & Discipline Shop in the pavilion. He was best friends with Omaki and once the lover of Heiku.

He has a pet, Arian, and two attending servants, Quin and Yura.

The House of Quiahtenon

Heiku Quiahtenon

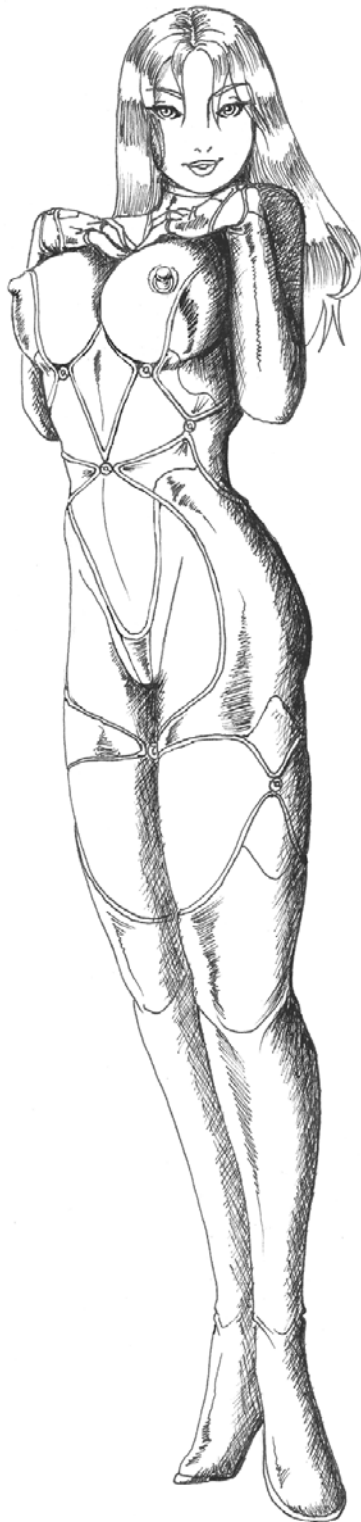
(pronounced “we ah teh non”)

A Blondie. Head of Reconstruction at Tanagura Medical. Heiku’s most striking attribute is his bionic arm, which is usually encased in a transparent outer shell, allowing the mechanical workings to be seen (pictured here with formal armor). He is fabulously wealthy and owns the Denovian Royal Suites, where royalty and ambassadors stay during their visits to Amoi.

Sarius

Heiku’s attending servant. A notorious gossip who is good friends with Ru, Omaki’s head servant.



**Ima**

Heiku's pet. Although Ima is an A-class pet, she has a propensity for deviance. She posed in a popular though technically illegal magazine while still at the Pet Academy. Everyone seems to know this fact about Ima except her own Master, much to the amusement of the Elites.

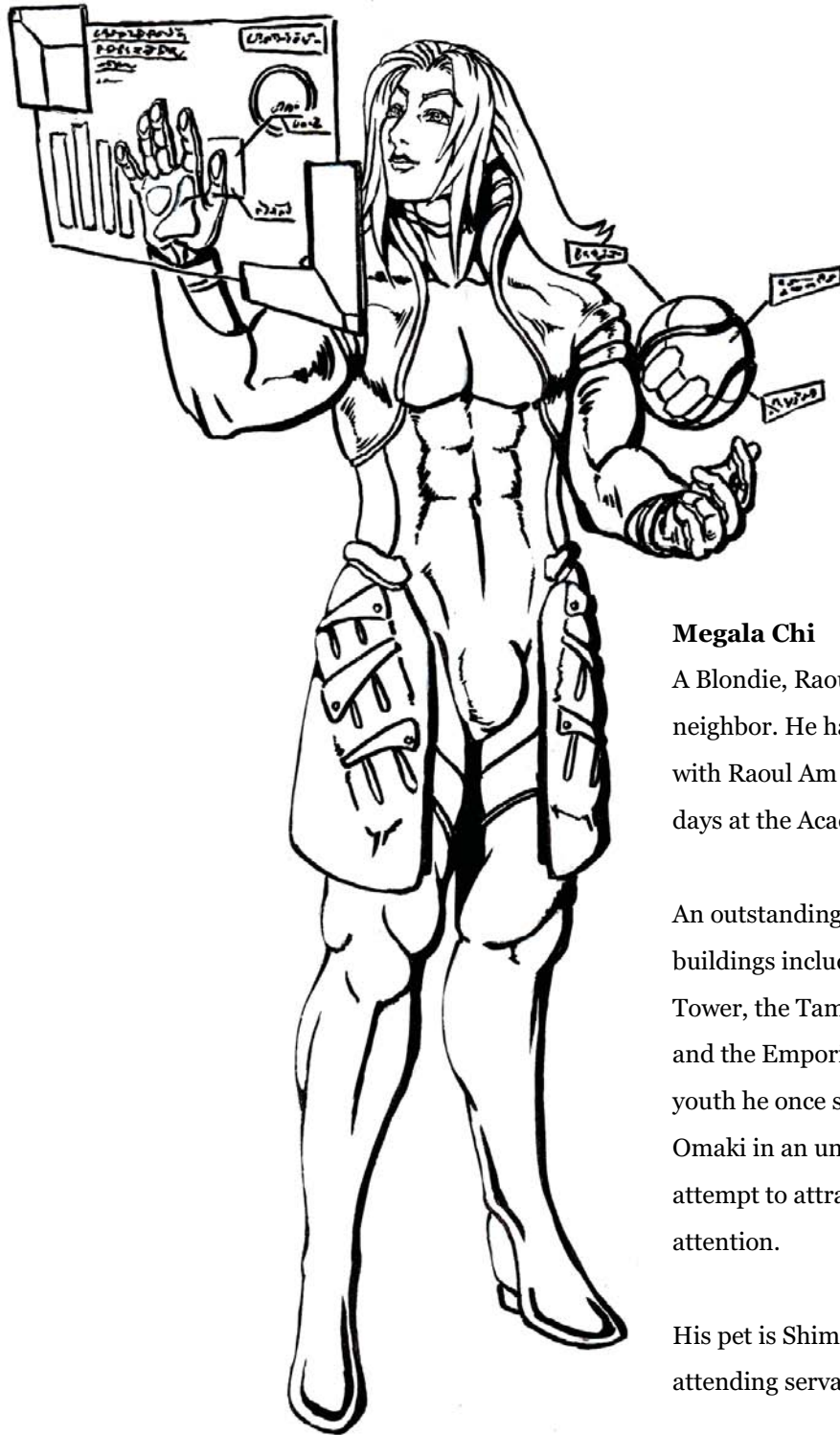
The House of Sami

Xian Sami

A Blondie. Xian is the Prefect of Vendel. He owns the Dark Horse brothel in Apatia as well as a villa on Lake Erphanes once owned by Yousi. He is the only Blondie with golden eyes.



The House of Chi



Megala Chi

A Blondie, Raoul's next door neighbor. He has been in love with Raoul Am since their days at the Academy.

An outstanding architect, his buildings include the Eos Tower, the Taming Tower, and the Emporium. In his youth he once slept with Omaki in an unsuccessful attempt to attract Raoul's attention.

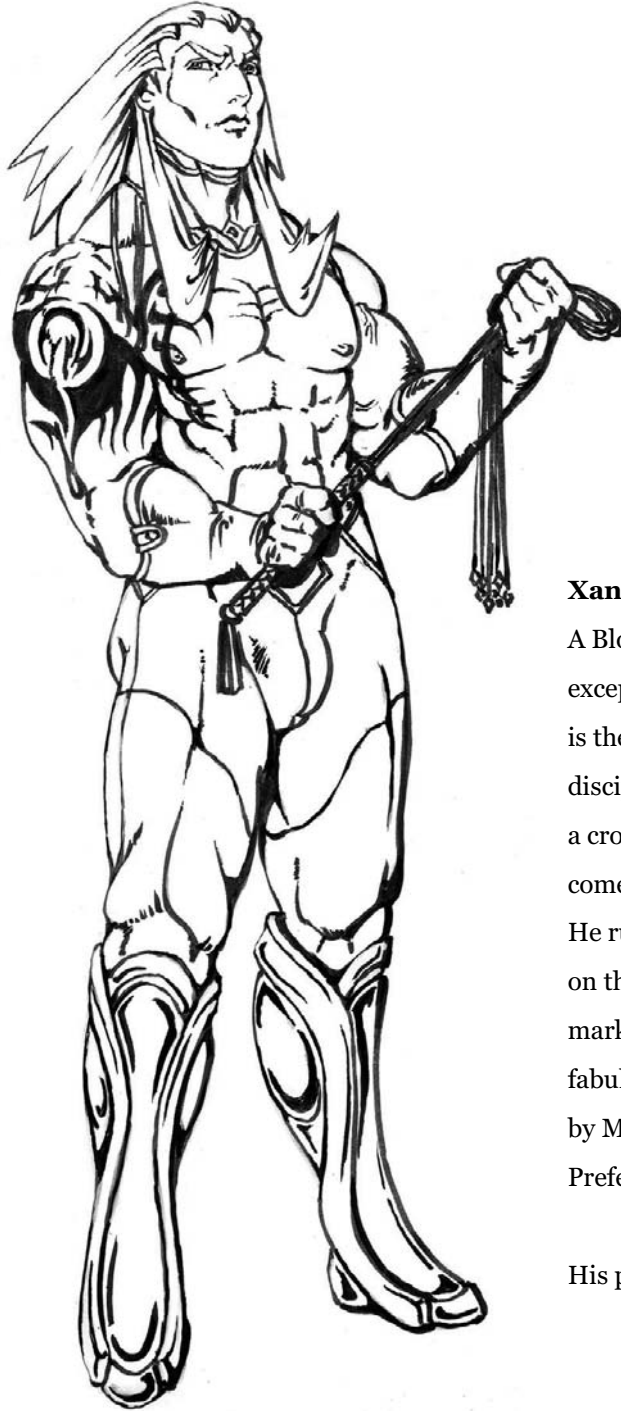
His pet is Shimeria and his attending servant is Nomi.

The House of Iman

**Yutaku Iman**

A Blondie and physician at Tanagura Medical, specializing in reconstruction, transplants and scar removal. Yutaku is a friend and colleague of Heiku Quiahtenon, and a close friend of Xanthus Kahn. He is known for his unorthodox philosophy and advocates an Amoian democracy like that established on Icaria.

The House of Kahn

**Xanthus Kahn**

A Blondie. Known for his exceptional strength, Xanthus is the most feared disciplinarian on Amoi and is a crowd favorite when it comes to public whippings. He runs a fishing enterprise on the coast with a flourishing market in Midas and owns a fabulous seaside estate, built by Megala Chi. Xanthus is the Prefect of Manatung.

His pet is Golarian.

The House of Sung



Konami Sung

Headmaster of the Academy for Elites, a disciplinarian and father figure to most Blondies, including Iason Mink.

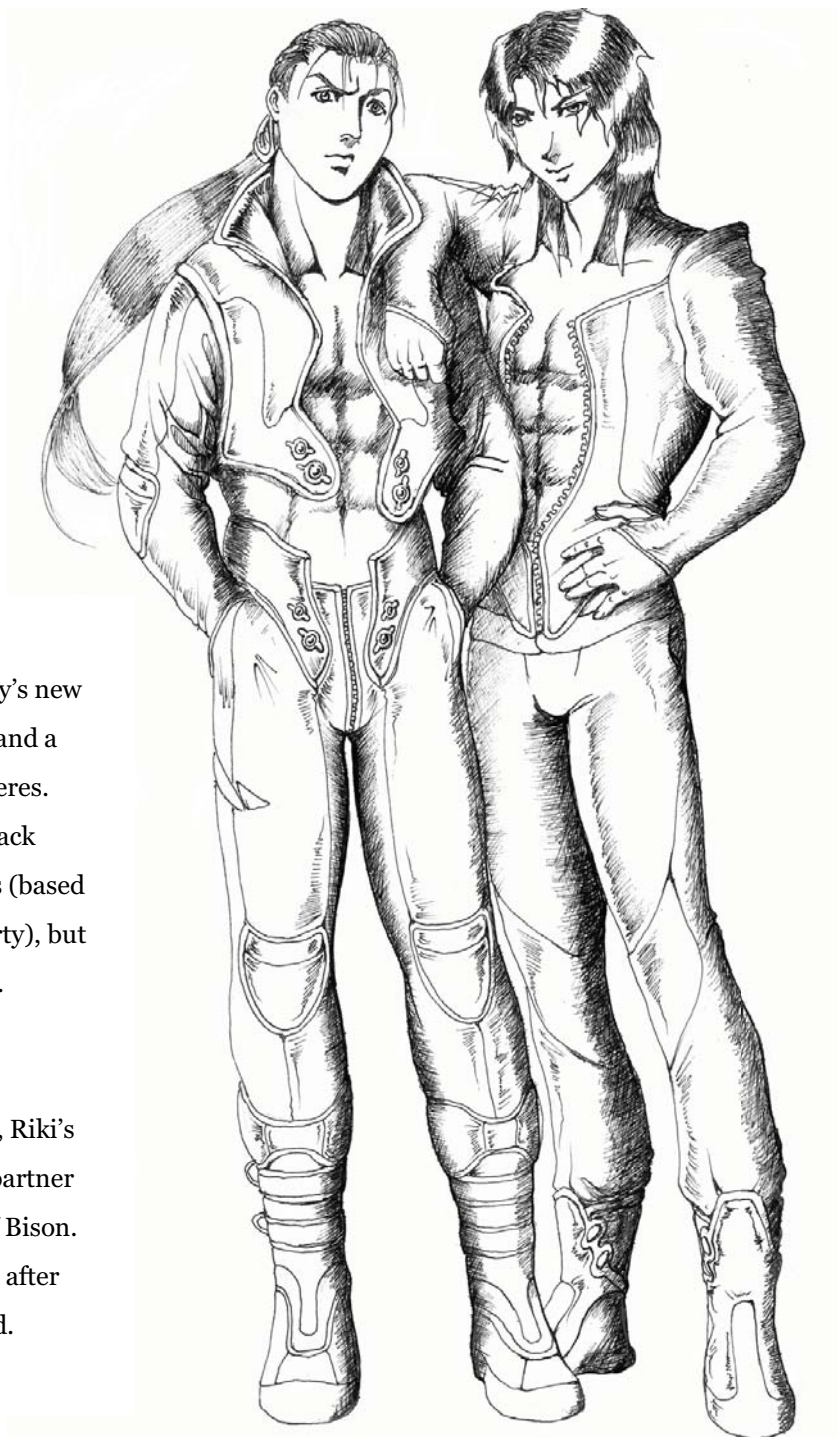
❧ Other Important Characters ❧

Kei

Kei (right) is Guy's new pairing partner and a mongrel from Ceres. Runs his own black market in Midas (based on stolen property), but can't rival Katze.

Guy

A mongrel (left), Riki's former pairing partner and co-leader of Bison. Took over Bison after Riki disappeared.





**Commander Voshka
Khosi**

A handsome and powerful
military commander
famous for his many
exploits and campaigns
and his sudden rise to
power on Alpha Zen. He is
the brother of
Ambassador Anori Khosi.

✧ Minor Characters ✧

Ambassador Anori Khosi

The deceased brother of Voshka Khosi, Anori had a tryst with Raoul Am years before while staying in Iason's home.

Aroguay Raythe

Ayuda's teacher, Aroguay emphasizes careful observation as the most important skill for security guards.

Elusiaux Kain

An Elite, the father of Suuki, Aki's young friend.

Elusius Puck

A Blondie known for his cruelty to members of his household.

Goda Bandora

Owner of the shop Goda's Post.

Hentu

Pet of Sanyara Ven, Hentu is the pet who once stole Azka's earring.

Kobin Nu

A Blondie and close friend of Xanthus Kahn, Kobin runs a fishing enterprise on the coasts of Midas. His pet is Jewel.

Norju Faire

A Blondie. His pet is Emerald, one of the two females Riki encountered at Cornucopia.

Sanyara Ven

A Blondie that Omaki once slept with. His pet is Hentu.

Suuki Kain

Son of Elusiaux Kain. Aki's friend.

Wyn Qantum/Aranshu

Notorious assassin, responsible for the massacre at the palace of Arubia on Aristia. Also the runaway pet of Commander Khosi.

Yenna

Iason's second favorite pet, after Riki.

Zanbar Su

An Elite with an insatiable appetite for gossip who runs "the Channel," an audio-only gossip broadcast on an Independent frequency listened to by Elites, servants, and pets alike.

Map of Amoi



✧ Glossary ✧

Academy: All citizens attend some sort of Academy: the Elite Academy, Pet Academy, Military Academy, or the Academy for Public Service. Blondies reside at the Elite Academy in Jupiter Hall from birth. Other Elites (those with silver/grey hair) attend when they reach the age of nine. At age 12, Elites can opt to finish their education at the Military Academy to serve in the Amoian Guard. Military cadets serve an apprenticeship either in the Amoian Guard or on another planet before they matriculate. Pets are either bred by the Masters that own them, are born in the Pet Academy, or are imported from the border planet, Gardan. All non-Elite citizens who are not pets attend the Academy for Public Service, learning the trade they have been assigned to by Jupiter.

Accelerator: A topical medication that promotes the healing of wounds and reduces scarring through accelerated activity at the molecular level. The administration of Accelerator is very painful.

Agatha: A poison used during the Gang Wars. Survivors often experience excruciating headaches and reportedly see visions from time to time (called Halos). Agatha poisoning is said to enhance telepathic and precognitive abilities. See Halos.

Alpha Zen: A very cold but beautiful planet, with volcanoes, glaciers, boiling mud, geysers, waterfalls, mountains, and impressive fjords. Alpha Zen is a complex blend of ancient warrior cultures and longstanding traditions, city-states, and the most technologically advanced modern society in the Quadrant. The planet is known for its exports in G-wave emission technology, sex toys, weaponry, armor, cognac, brandy, taming sticks and paddles, security devices, fine art, games, and literature. It was ruled for nearly 500 years by a senatorial democracy (an oligarchy) until Commander Khosi rose to power. Ultanum is the capital city.

Ambrosia: An expensive cognac from Alpha Zen. Raoul's favorite.

Amoi: Jupiter's planet. Amoi was originally believed to be previously uninhabited before Tanagura was built. However, archaeological discoveries have revealed the existence of many thriving ancient civilizations predating Jupiter's creation and sentience.

Amoian Calendar: The Amoian year is 585 days long, comprising 13 lunar months, each 45 days long. The Amoian day is 26 hours long. The days of the 9-day week are: Iosday, Tahnday, Danaburn, Erphanesday, Midweek, Darkfall, Astrajia's Rest, Jupiter's Eve, and Moonday. (Iosday and Erphanesday derive their names from the legendary brothers Ios and Erphanes. Tahnday is named after the famous military commander Jun Than. Astrajia takes its name from the goddess Astrajia. Danaburn

takes its name from the site of the Revolution, Dana Burn.) The moons Ios and Erphanes share identical cycles, thus they are referred to as the “twins.”

Amoian Guard: The Amoian military. Anyone within the Telepsi Galaxy may join the Amoian Guard. Terms are for two years and pay well. Warriors may remain in the Guard for as many terms as they like, provided they can pass the Term Screening exam.

Anubius: An immense asteroid the size of a small planet in an elliptical orbit around Amoi’s sun. On its approach, every few hundred years, Amoi experiences spectacular meteor showers.

Apatia: A posh province in Midas where many Blondies keep their pets in private condominiums. The Taming Tower, the Dark Horse brothel, and the Denovian Royal Suites are all located in Apatia.

Apprenticeship: Select Blondies at the Academy are slated by Jupiter for apprenticeship, also called the “Syndicate track.” Those who manage to secure this highly-coveted honor typically work in the Syndicate with direct access to Jupiter (though only the Head of the Syndicate usually reports to her in person). The Head of the Syndicate is always selected from among Syndicate apprentices. Elites who choose to join the Amoian Guard also complete an apprenticeship with a military Commander before they graduate from the Military Academy.

Aristia: A border planet, Aristia is warm all year round with extensive beaches and mild weather, a favorite “vacation spot” for dignitaries from throughout the Sector. Aristia is known for its fine wines, luxurious perfumes, silks, and beautiful music, and is the home planet of Tai, who is a member of the ruling family, the House of Merovia.

Aristian Amber Crystal: A stunningly beautiful iridescent gem.

Aristian Red Emperor: An expensive, fine red wine. Iason’s favorite.

Armah: A deity worshipped by many Aristians, including Tai.

Arman: A province of Alpha Zen, most infamously known for the “midnight uprising”—a massive slave revolt that was eventually crushed by Commander Kattahar and his Lieutenants Meshka Tung and Voshka Khosi. Named after the Battle of Arman, a legendary Amoian battle.

Assignment: Jupiter formally recognizes all citizens at the age of nine, at which time they receive their identification number and classification. All non-pets also receive an assignment. The assignment for non-Elites is some sort of trade or occupation, such as a security guard or a shopkeeper. Citizens do not have the option of rejecting their assignment. An assignment of “General Service” is the lowest but broadest classification; a citizen assigned to General Service can choose from any number of

occupations, including janitor, cook, driver, or attending servant. The Elite assignment is a “track” of studies that will prepare them for various high-ranking positions in Eos; the most prestigious assignment is the Syndicate Track, which gives select Blondies access to Jupiter’s mainframe.

Astrajia: Goddess worshipped by many on Amoi, including Katze.

Astrajia’s Rest: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Auction Posting: The official Syndicate listing of pets being put up at the next auction, with photographs and starting bids, distributed free of charge. All purchased pets dread the release of the posting; a Master’s announcement that he is “going to the auction” is usually a hint that a new purchase is imminent.

Battle of Arman: Legendary battle in which Ios made a grave error; though he was severely wounded in the battle, he was to receive twenty lashes for his mistake but his brother, Erphanes, stood in for him instead.

Blondie: See *Elites*.

Broadcaster: Spyware device that uses existing security systems, such as cameras, to relay information to a remote viewing location.

C9000 Lightbender: Fastest known spacecraft in the Galaxy. Travels at a rate of 9000 Cepaks/minute.

Cellpad: A handheld computer with holoprojection capabilities.

Cepak: Unit of distance traveled. Equivalent to about 1 *Hecatron* (50 miles).

Ceres: A province in Midas that is no longer officially recognized by Jupiter. It is where only mongrels live. Now a slum, Ceres was once home to the leading families of Amoi before the Revolution. Situated on the western side of Manatung Bay, Ceres is close to Lake Erphanes, where many Elite still maintain villas, but is separated from that area by a stretch of wetlands.

Counting Stick: A type of taming stick, a counting stick is a long cane that counts the number of strikes during a punishment session.

Cowberry Tea: A Gardanian special import, cowberry tea has a calming effect.

Dana Burn: Site of the original insurrection against Jupiter, Dana Burn is an abandoned shelter near the sea, in Ceres.

Danaburn: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Dark Baccalias: A pricey, specialty cigarette, imported from Alpha Zen; Riki's favorite. Each pack costs about 1000 credits. Dark Baccalias offers a smooth smoke and is mildly intoxicating. Its active substance, *yutonga*, is found only on Alpha Zen and is very addictive. However, yutonga soothes cravings and addictions to other substances.

Darkfall: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Dark Horse: A pet brothel in Apatia (a province in Midas), owned by Xian Sami.

Dark Kings of Zahtu: A line of ancient Amoian kings from the Vendal dynasty said to be the finest artists on Amoi, nearly every one of the kings committed suicide.

Daytripper: A mongrel that sneaks into Tanagura for recreational purposes.

Depravities: A club/pool hall in Midas owned by Omaki Ghan.

Denovian Royal Suites: A posh hotel where foreign dignitaries and royalty stay when visiting Amoi, owned by Heiku Quiahtenon. Located in Apatia, the pleasure district of Midas, on the coast of the Amoian Sea.

Documentor Orb: Recording device typically used to record punishment sessions that are administered in order to document compliance with punishment minimums, as set forth in the General Code.

Echo Board: An Alphazenian device used to bypass signature security systems. The device replicates the genetic signature of the last individual to "leave" the restricted area.

Elites: The highest ranking class of citizens on Amoi. Blondies are considered Elites, but they outrank all non-Blondie Elites. The role of the Elites is to ensure order and stability in Amoian society and to protect Jupiter. Thus Elites control most enterprises and real estate on Amoi and serve in a variety of governing capacities. All Elites serve on some type of Council, while some Blondies serve as "Prefect" of an assigned region (a *province*, or Area). For instance, Iason Mink is the Prefect of Eos, and Omaki Ghan is Prefect of Apatia.

E-zone: The "red light" district of Midas, in Apatia, at the hub of the city's night life. The Taming Tower is situated in the center of the E-zone, near the Dark Horse.

Emission Technology: Technology that allows a device to "emit" additional effects or substances. For instance, the MXV Emperor has six emission options—sting, G-wave, stimulant, buffer, Accelerator, and opiate release. Sting releases an irritant into the flesh. G-wave elicits sexual arousal. Stimulant releases a potent hexagon-norepinephrine derivative to revive the unconscious. Buffer provides the usual protective retracting mechanism to reduce scarring—quite an innovation for the whip, although some scarring is still probable. Accelerator applies an opiate-free

Accelerator with each lash to promote healing—also quite painful. Opiate release provides variable options for administering pain relief.

Emporium: A recreational facility for Elites. It also houses art and museum exhibits.

Enkephalin Meditation Spheres: A form of emission technology that works in concert with the user's brain waves. If the user is able to achieve a theta brain wave, the spheres trigger an endorphin release, using the body's own natural opiates, enkephalins. The spheres are used to develop meditative abilities and are popular among the Elites.

Eos: The central province of Tanagura where most Blondies live and where Jupiter's Tower, the Eos Tower and the Emporium are located.

Erphanes: Legendary twin of Ios. Ios and Erphanes were warriors and lovers from the Lost Age who decided to commit suicide rather than renounce their love. According to legend, the brothers drank poison and died on the beach as the tides came in. Their souls were said to be transformed into the twin moons of Amoi, which take their names.

Erphanesday: See *Amoian Calendar*.

First Year: The first year that young Blondies from Jupiter Hall attend formal classes at the Academy, at age nine.

Forbidden Chest: The Forbidden Chest or box is a device used by some Masters to test the loyalty of pets and their ability to obey commands in the face of temptation and curiosity. The chest was kept in a special place in the household and the pet was instructed never to open it. Any pet that violated this mandate found a message inside informing them that their Master had just been alerted of their disobedience. The technique of the Forbidden Chest is ancient in origin yet continues to be used because its deception was guarded with the utmost secrecy.

Gaman: An Alphazanian god.

Gamian: A bright purple gem only found on Xeron, considered the most valuable stone in the entire Quadrant and a favorite of royalty, highly coveted by the Elites.

Gang Wars: A period of intense instability in Ceres not long after the Revolution, when those who had lost their citizenship—eventually known as mongrels—began fighting among themselves to survive the streets of the slums.

Gardan: A border planet, where the concept of “pets” originated. Gardan provided Amoi with pets long before the Syndicate was created and Amoi began its own pet auctions.

Galath: A distant planet, a neighbor of Alpha Zen. Its inhabitants are considered rather

unattractive.

General Code: Created by Jupiter, the Code is a book of legal rules and regulations that bind all Amoian citizens.

Ghevoenichi: A much sought after type of vase, second only to a Vergatti.

Gripping-beast: An ancient Urasian motif that consists of a stylized beast gripping its own legs. Found in ancient artifacts and modern replicas of Urasian weapons.

G-strap: Punishment device used to discipline unruly pets and eunuchs. It emits G-wave technology, which eventually causes arousal in non-eunuchs. Can be used in conjunction with a D-type pet ring for enhanced G-wave stimulation.

Guardianship: A formal arrangement whereby a Blondie may raise the child of a non-Blondie Elite or a non-Elite. Extremely rare though the requirements are articulated in Section 116.45 of the General Code.

G-wave Devices: An Alpha Zen specialty, G-wave devices emit G-waves at 10,000 times the level of a pet ring or G-strap and can literally produce, in a eunuch, a replication of the pleasure achieved at orgasm. The device is strapped around the pelvis and can be fitted with “toys” or organ simulators for a more authentic sexual experience.

G-wave Technology: Gamma-wave emissions used in pet-rings, straps, and sexual devices. Depending on the sort of emission, these can cause pleasure or pain.

Halo: A vision induced by Agatha poisoning, sometimes, but not always, accompanied by a terrible headache.

Hecatron: Unit of measurement equivalent to about 50 miles.

Hexagon-Norepinephrine Derivative: A special type of synthetic stimulant that is extremely powerful. Discovered by the Amoians.

Hiroshi's palace: The palace of Prince Hiroshi of Xeron, where Enyu was raised.

Holo-pic, holo-projector: Holographic picture; holographic device that projects holographic films.

Icaria: A border planet. The only democracy in the entire Quadrant, Icaria was in ancient times once home to an extremely barbaric culture, the Vendi. Known to Amoian Blondies for its line of fabulously decorated whips, and for its honey, beer, and fine white wines, which are usually purchased first by Xeron and then exported to Amoi. The Icarians are afraid of Jupiter and refuse to deal directly with Amoi.

Icarian Amber: Iason's second favorite wine, imported from Icaria. An expensive, fine

white wine, known for its mild aphrodisiac qualities.

Icarian Gold: A very good stout imported from Icaria.

Independent Channel: Used by Omaki and Heiku, among others, it is a channel for communications that Jupiter cannot intercept, thus, Jupiter cannot “listen in” on what’s being said. All other channels are automatically monitored by Jupiter (there is no way to prevent this, since she controls the entire grid). Independent channels are illegal on Amoi.

Interceptor: An illegal import from Xeron that blocks tracer signals within a 200-hecatron radius.

Interstasis: A rarely documented state of near hibernation brought on by trauma in which all metabolic processes are sluggish.

Ios: See *Erphanes*.

Iosday: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Iotung: A board-game similar to draughts.

Juntahn: A province in Midas, named after the famous military commander Jun Tahn.

Jupiter: The sentient computer that controls Tanagura.

Jupiter’s Eve: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Kalama Roots: An Amoian delicacy, a type of root that stimulates the release of endorphins, which cause pleasurable sensations in the body.

Kasey-whips: Stiff but flexible whips, similar to crop whips, with varying thickness. Class numbers are from 1 to 21. Lower class whips lack the more extensive buffering mechanisms to prevent scarring as well as other fancy emission technology, but the upper class numbers are thicker and more brutal. The C-20 Spider releases a poison that paralyzes the receptive parties or persons, causing them to eventually stop breathing and is used for terminal punishment. A C-21 is specifically designed to arouse eunuchs, but when used on a fully-equipped male, the end result is castration without organ removal.

King Chunamenkahn: Ancient Amoian king from the Lost Age said to be gifted in the art of spells and battle magic.

Krevlians: A cream-filled pastry typically served at breakfast.

Krostafish: A type of fish with sharp, vicious teeth; during the Gang Wars of Midas,

some mongrels were fed to the fish to die horribly gruesome deaths.

Kruska: A type of decorative pond fish, usually bright red with yellow or orange markings.

Lake Erphanes: A deep, pristine blue lake west of Tanagura where the villas of the Elites are located.

Lost Age: Amoian history, pre-Jupiter. See *Minas Qentu*.

Manatung: A province in Midas.

Manatung Bay: A bay that separates Ceres from the other provinces of Midas, where the best Amoian fishing markets are located.

Menteros: An ancient Alphazanian custom in which an older sibling or uncle takes it upon himself to train a younger brother or nephew in the sexual arts.

Messenger capsule: A small, cylindrical tube that contains important items, hand-delivered by a messenger from one planet to another. Considered a formal, exceedingly polite way to deliver items and is not often used due to prohibitive costs. Another use for the messenger capsule is to bypass Jupiter's scrutiny.

Midas: A satellite city surrounding Tanagura. Midas is known as the "Pleasure City" and is where the Elite go for recreation and entertainment. It is divided into seven provinces: Apatia, Manatung, Juntahn, Vendel, Mistral Park, Neal Darts and Ceres. Pets are often kept in Midas condominiums, particularly in Apatia and Manatung. There are no condominiums in Ceres (the slums where the mongrels live) nor is that province frequented by Elites.

Midweek: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Minas Qentu: An archeological dig in the Amoian desert that uncovered evidence of ancient civilizations on the planet.

Mistral Park: A province in Midas.

Modification: The castration of a male for the purpose of becoming an attending servant. Usually the castration is voluntarily submitted to because it is considered a privilege to become an attending servant to an Elite. Modification can also refer to mind tampering, a form of punishment used by Jupiter to force deviants into neurological submission. Memories, behavioral patterns and attitudes—whole personalities, in fact—can be taken away. Raoul Am is responsible for organizing such "intervention" while Heiku Quiahtenon and Yutaku Iman perform the actual surgery.

Molecular Detector: A device used to determine the molecular structure of nearly any

known substance, utilized specifically to check for possible poisoning.

Moonday: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Mongrel: A descendent of the rebels from the Revolution, a permanent group of non-citizens who are barred from Tanagura and Jupiter's favor. They live in Ceres.

MXV Emperor. A very beautiful, very expensive (400,000 credit) whip from Xeron. "Though Iason had never been particularly fond of whips, he had always had a special weakness for fine craftsmanship, and began admiring the imported Icarian bone handles among some of the more luxurious models, most notably the engraved and bejeweled Emperor series. The MXV Emperor, in particular, was intricately engraved with an ancient gripping-beast motif, which Iason recognized as belonging to the barbarian culture of Urasia—an intriguing replica, especially considering the fact that it had been imported from Xeron. The tiny eyes of the beasts were inset with gems—rubies, sapphires, gamians, and an intriguing, multi-colored gem Iason did not recognize." – *Taming Riki* Vol. I, Part II.

Neal Darts: A province in Midas. Maylord, the mongrel poisoned by Agatha who survived and developed psychic abilities, lives there.

Off-List: An illegal handheld device that only operates on an Independent Channel. See *Independent Channel*.

Open Club: A club where sexual acts may be performed openly.

Opiate-3 (O-3): An analgesic similar to a strong narcotic.

Opiate-6 (O-6): A far stronger version of an O-3, so strong, in fact, that it can kill if dosage and use are abused. Death is more likely when one drinks alcohol with it.

Opiate-7 (O-7): The most potent non-anesthetic opiate available, it is so valuable on the Black Market that it is even used as currency.

Opiate-8 (O-8): An opiate combined with a numbing agent, usually injected.

Orange Miramer: Beautiful tiny bird with orange plumage that only sings at night.

Panther Lizard: A black lizard indigenous to the Yuren Oasis. It has immense, bulging eyes.

Party: A pet showing, sometimes involving a pairing (then called a *Pairing Party*).

Pavilion: An Elite market situated on the second level of the Eos Tower, where Yousi's Bondage & Discipline Shop is located.

Pet's Crown: A tiny tuft of hair in the genital region of the typically hairless Amoian pet,

considered to be a sign of sexual prowess.

Platinum X700: A top-of-the-line robotic plug, from Alpha Zen.

Prince Regiland: The legendary prince of Sorbus, a semi-mythical kingdom believed to thrive after the fall of King Chunamenkahn, who ruled during the Vendel period on old Amoi.

Puki: A particularly noxious plant that grows in the Amoian wastelands.

Quadrant: The Telepsi Galaxy is divided into four Quadrants. Amoi, Alpha Zen, Icaria, Aristia, Xeron, and Gardan are all in the same Quadrant.

Residual: A frequency imprint left behind when certain types of spyware devices are used, similar to a magnetic field.

Restoration: Restoring a eunuch (castrated male) to a fully-functioning male. An illegal procedure without Jupiter's sanction.

Revolution: An early rebellion by citizens of Tanagura and Midas against Jupiter's authority. The Revolution resulted in a permanent group of non-citizens, the mongrels, who were barred from Tanagura and Jupiter's favor forever.

Roadhugger: Any vehicle that lacks flight capacity. Also called *hugger*.

Scrambler: A Xeronian device specifically designed to unscramble security codes. Illegal on Amoi and most other planets.

Serendipity: An open club in Tanagura where Katze, Riki and Daryl go one night for a little fun.

Series 6500 Stun-Pen: A small weapon which causes temporary paralysis when deployed; the "stun" is very painful.

Sharlingale: A rare songbird on Amoi, imported from Aristia.

Signature Technology: The utilization of genetic signatures in a wide array of devices, such as security scanners, pet rings, restraints, or doors.

Skywalker: A hovercraft bike. Top of the line. Riki owns a Z990 model, the newest in the Skywalker series.

Taming Tower: The privately owned suites run by the infamous Omaki Ghan. It is a palace of punishment—a dark, but posh hotel, designed by Megala Chi, where Elites bring their pets and servants to be tamed into total submission. In the case of pets—who, with the occasional deviant exception, were typically docile from inbred

controls—Elites bring them simply to unleash their own sadistic fetishes on them. It is no secret that many Blondies enjoyed disciplining their pets for no reason other than their own amusement, and Omaki Ghan caters to these Elites, offering every sort of device and assistive technology available to appeal to the dark tastes of Tanagurian Blondies. Pets slated for termination are often brought to the Tower and there typically whipped to death with a C-20 kasey. Omaki Ghan also handles the relocation of unwanted pets—the placement of older pets into brothels and open clubs and the disposal of those deliberately or accidentally killed during punishment.

Taming Stick: Discipline instrument. “The taming stick had no fancy technology, no protective buffering system, no variable settings—it was just old-fashioned, brutal punishment intended to be wielded without restraint, saved for the most rebellious, disobedient pets.” – *Taming Riki* Vol. I, Part I.

Tanagura: Jupiter’s city and home of the Elites.

Tanagura Medical: Tanagura’s biggest hospital, known throughout the Quadrant for its state-of-the-art medical care. Iason Mink funded the entire Children’s Wing and is the hospital’s most generous benefactor.

Tarnacsian Cider: The cider is a strong aphrodisiac made especially for eunuchs.

Telepsi: Amoi’s galaxy.

The Chameleon: A trendy, posh clothing shop in Midas, owned by Tagira Nomartsu.

The Channel: An audio-only gossip channel listened to by Elites, servants, and pets alike. The Channel was banned for a time by Jupiter but was eventually tolerated due to its unflagging popularity. It runs on the off-list frequency 507.8 with the main transmission originating from the private residence of Zanbar Su.

Thermoscanner: An instrument used to detect the body heat emitted by life forms and thus determine their location; can project in a 50 hecatron radius.

T-stand: Punishment/bondage/restraining device that restrains arms and legs spread-eagled, in an upright (standing) position.

Tahnday: See *Amoian Calendar*.

Unclassified: An individual that, for some reason, lacks an official classification (Elite, Servant, Pet). Rare.

Urasia: An ancient barbarian culture that thrived on Amoi 2,500,000 million years before Jupiter’s awakening.

Urus: A second, much smaller Amoian city west of Midas. It was built by the Elites as

another pleasure city—considered “safer” than Midas because it was free of mongrels, and soon attracted a steady flow of tourists from the border planets during the summer months. The city is positioned along the ocean and many Elites own beachfront property there. The city is unique in that its power source does not depend on Jupiter. The city uses Elite identification and security, though, so it remains off-limits to mongrels. Urus arose as Tanagura became increasingly crowded, but beyond Urus no other cities have been built since the rest of the planet is a wasteland. It has also become a cluster for research and development.

Vendal Dynasty: Ancient line of kings from the Lost Age, known for their patronage of the arts.

Vendel: A province in Midas.

Vendel Park: A park on the outskirts of Midas in the province of Vendel, frequented mostly by the Elite. Popular for its elaborate sculptures, fountains, and breathtaking gardens.

Vendi: A barbaric culture of ancient Icaria.

Weenus: Slang for *penis*. An expression used mostly by children.

White Moon: Iason’s third favorite wine. An expensive, fine white wine.

X3000 Holotape dispenser: A device that projects a three-dimensional barrier wherever the tape is laid down.

X900 Guardian: A hovering security device capable of retinal scanning and identification processing, possessing a database of all known identifications in the galaxy. There are only five such devices in existence, each costing five billion credits. From Xeron.

Xeron: Enyu’s home planet. The hominid males have a 5-day rutting cycle. Feline males are empathic and make good pets.

Yewshi Reed: A type of very strong reed, much like bamboo.

Yuntungs: A type of fish, rolled into a biscuit and typically served for breakfast.

Yuren: An Amoian wasteland settlement. Yuren developed around an immense oasis of desert cacao, the source of all indigenous chocolate on the planet. Named after the planet Yurenia.

Yurenia: A planet from the Second Sector, known for its exports of candy.

Yutonga: The active substance in Dark Baccalias, mildly intoxicating and very addictive.

Found only on Alpha Zen.

Zavo Vergatti: One of Iason's favorite artists and a friend of Voshka Khosi. A "Vergatti" is a much sought after, very expensive sculpture.

Zerovian: The most expensive hovercraft available on Amoi.

Zoto Chakra: Clothing designer whose expensive lines are popular among the Elites.

